

Arifureta: From Commonplace to World's Strongest Vol. 6

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ARIFURETA:

ARIFURETA SHOKUGYOU DE SEKAI SAIKYOU

FROM COMMONPLACE
TO WORLD'S STRONGEST



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#6

ERI NAKAMURA





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Prologue

In the dead of night, a shadow crept up the face of a small hill. It stayed low to the ground, stopping every few steps to examine its surroundings. The shadow turned out to be a monster that looked vaguely like a dog, a chill wind ruffling its black fur.

After some time, it crested the hill and stared at the sea of lights in the distance. Said lights were man-made. They were the flower of the night, the glimmer of the Heiligh Kingdom's capital.

The majority of the capital's citizens were fast asleep. But for the city's thieves, black market merchants, and other unsavory types, the night was just beginning.

Aside from them, the city's watchmen and throngs of adventurers also walked the streets, which of course meant some enterprising merchants kept their stores open late to cater to them.

The capital was a far cry from Fuhren though, as that city never slept. Every few minutes, another light winked out of existence, until finally the capital was shrouded in darkness. Only the distant twinkling of the stars and the moon's cruel light illuminated the night now.

The monster, who'd been watching the capital's lights dwindle, jumped with a start when it sensed something behind it. It flipped around and looked warily at the newcomer.

"Grr..." The newcomer didn't respond to its growled challenge.

That was only natural, as what had appeared behind the monster was no living creature.

The ground in front of the monster glimmered with light. The presence it had sensed was an amalgamation of mana. It stared warily at the light, unsure of what to do.

Nothing happened for a while, so the monster cautiously approached the magical light. It seemed like the mana was stored underground, and only some of its light was leaking to the surface.

The monster started digging with its front paws, and its claws eventually struck against something hard. Eventually, it found a stone slab engraved with unnatural geometric patterns.

Curious, the monster started digging the stone slab out.

A second later, it leaped back in surprise. Another section of the ground was glowing now too. Yet another glowing circle popped up after that, and a fourth after that.

The monster's instincts were screaming at it to flee. It dashed off, running as fast as its legs would carry it.

It had made the correct choice. Once it had put some distance between the anomaly and itself, it turned around to see more than a hundred lights dotting the top of the hill. The lights joined together, creating one massive magic circle.

The strange carvings on the stone slab had been a miniaturized version of the pattern on the circle. Had a certain vampire princess been present, she would have recognized the design.

It was the magic circle for a teleportation spell.

And, unfortunately for the citizens of the capital, it was big enough to transport an entire army.

Chapter I: A Disturbing Darkness

Shea was the first to notice something.

“Hm? Hajime-san... isn’t there someone being attacked over there?” As always, Hajime and Yue had started flirting, which had led Kaori to interrupt them, distracting Hajime from his driving and making him swerve recklessly. Shea’s words finally tore his attention away from the battle of the stands that was happening between Yue’s thunder dragon and Kaori’s now powered-up ice demon, so he looked out the front windshield.

He spotted a merchant caravan under attack. They seemed to be holding their own for the moment. As they grew closer, Shea’s ears picked up on the sounds of people shouting, and Hajime activated Farsight to get a better idea of what was going on.

“Looks like they’re fighting bandits. There’s... forty of them, it looks like. They’re all dressed in rags. Hmm, only have about fifteen guards... I can’t believe they’re holding their own with only that many people.”

“Yeah. That barrier’s pretty good.”

“Indeed, it’s protecting them as well as a castle wall would. Those brigands cannot approach the merchants so long as it stands. Plus, they won’t last long if they continue taking such concentrated magical attacks.”

“But it doesn’t look like the bandits are backing down.”

“Well, unless they’ve got an entire party of Barrier Masters in there, they won’t be able to hold something that powerful for long. As long as the bandits keep at it, they’ll win. Their defenses won’t last.”

They must have been taken by surprise. A number of the merchants’ guards were lying on the ground in a pool of their own blood. A few others were gravely injured.

The only reason they were still holding out was because of the barrier. But with such an overwhelming difference in numbers, each guard that went down was a huge loss. Once the barrier fell, they’d be overwhelmed in seconds. One of the female adventurers had already been captured by the bandits. She’d been stripped naked and strung up as an example to the others still fighting.

As Hajime had predicted, the merchants weren’t able to keep up the barrier. Right around when their conversation ended, it began to crumble.

The bandits swooped in with whoops of joy. Their thoughts were already turning toward the loot they'd soon have, and they smiled viciously. The remaining guards fought valiantly, but they were completely outnumbered. One after another, they began to fall.

Kaori raised her hands to her mouth and gasped. She turned to Hajime and begged him to help.

"Hajime-kun, please! We have to save them! What if..." Hajime didn't even wait for her to finish. He poured more mana into Brise and sped up. The merchants would be doomed if he spent time debating whether or not they should help. He'd hear Kaori's explanation later. First, he needed to save them. If there was one thing Hajime prided himself on, it was his decisiveness. Especially when it came to requests from his comrades.

Brise roared down the plain, a trail of smoke rising in its wake.

"Hajime-kun... Thanks." Kaori smiled, glad that Hajime was willing to listen to her. Hajime just shrugged his shoulders.

Meanwhile, Yue and the others hurriedly strapped on their seatbelts. They knew what Hajime was about to do.

"U-Umm, Hajime-kun? You aren't planning on..." Kaori's expression stiffened as she saw Brise hurtling toward the crowd of bandits. She knew she'd been the one to ask Hajime for help, but as someone who lived in a world with cars, she'd assumed he would have hesitated in doing something so unethical.

Hajime turned to Kaori and replied with a straight face.

"When you see criminals, you run them over... Isn't that what they teach in driving school?"

"It's not! Stop making up your own traffic laws! Look, even Yue and the others agree with me!"

Hajime ignored Kaori and drove Brise straight toward the rear of the bandits, aiming for the one that appeared to be their leader. It was clear he believed vehicles existed to run over bad guys.

The bandit leader noticed Brise too late. He started shouting panicked orders to his men and began casting a spell. He was sure this strange black box was some kind of new monster; he would never have guessed it was actually a metal vehicle made for transporting people.

Hajime poured more mana into Brise and activated one of the gadgets he'd attached to it. Meter-long blades popped out of the sides and front of the hood.

The men hurtled fireballs at the monstrosity bearing down on them, but they had no noticeable effect. Hajime ignored their pathetic attempts at resistance and powered forward.

The bandits trembled in fear as they watched the black box shrug off their best attacks. There was a sickening crunch and Hajime

powered into the mass of unarmored bandits. Despair and confusion was etched onto their faces as they were blown away by Brise.

A few of them were pushed up onto the hood and sliced apart by the blades on there. Others tried to dodge out of the way and were sliced apart from the blades on the side. Those fortunate enough to avoid death by slicing were blown apart by the force of a giant truck slamming into them at 80km/h, their bodies utterly pulverized.

In the span of a single second, seven bandits were killed. After destroying the bandits' backline, Hajime drifted Brise to a halt.

Both the bandits and the merchants stared blankly at Brise. The sudden carnage had left them speechless. Some of the guards and bandits had stopped mid-swing, even.

Hajime ignored them and turned to Kaori.

"If we're doing this, I'm not going to show any mercy. I'll kill them all. No healing any of them. You get that, right?"

"Yeah. I know."

He knew how kind Kaori was, but he had no intention of letting her heal his enemies. If she did, she'd no longer be his comrade, at which point she'd have to return to Kouki's party.

Kaori took a deep breath and nodded.

"Alright, then go. I won't get in your way."

"Okay!"

Kaori leaped out of Brise and ran to the injured merchants. The bandits had been shocked senseless when Brise had showed up. However, Kaori just looked like an ordinary girl. That was something they could handle. They let their anger fuel them and attacked.

"Die, you bitch!" One of the bandits brandished his sword at her.

Kaori only spared the man a glance before turning her attention back to the injured. She continued running to the injured merchants and started chanting a healing spell.

That only made the bandit angrier, but before he could vent his frustrations, he was slaughtered. Hajime had blown his head clean off.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! With each gunshot, another bandit lost their life. Even the guards, who were the ones being saved, shivered in fear as they watched Hajime slaughter the bandits.

It was just so merciless. In the span of a few seconds, over half of the forty-odd bandits were executed.

Some of the bandits panicked and tried to take the merchants hostage, but they were met by Shea, who leaped in front of them.

One of the guards shouted out a warning to her, but it was entirely unnecessary. At this point Shea was so overpowered she could even give Hajime a run for his money. This fighting rabbit had no blind spots. She summoned Drucken from her Treasure Trove and held it aloft. Then, she swung it with such force that a wall of air was

pushed forward. The three men charging at the merchants crumpled to the ground with the upper halves of their bodies missing.

“Huh? Wah, look at all that blood!” It had been so long since they’d fought an actually weak enemy, so none of them were able to hold back too well. Shea had been planning on only sending them flying, but she’d accidentally cut them in half. It was quite a gruesome sight. Shea jumped back away from the sudden fountain of blood that erupted in front of her.

Yue and Tio spared Shea a single glance before obliterating the remaining bandits in a storm of magic.

The few who tried to escape had their heads blown off by Hajime. They didn’t even have time to beg for their lives. Their punishment was swift and thorough.

Kaori used Holy Blessing, an AoE healing skill, to heal the injured merchants and adventurers all at once. Unfortunately, a number of them were already dead. And sadly, not even restoration magic could bring back the dead.

She ground her teeth, frustrated that she hadn’t been able to save everyone. As she was lamenting their deaths, someone came running up to her. They were wearing a cowl over their face, so their features were unrecognizable. However, Hajime could tell by the color of the mana surrounding her that she was the one who’d cast that barrier earlier. And so, he saw no reason to stop her.

“Kaori!” The girl threw herself into Kaori’s arms. Kaori was honestly surprised that her guess had been correct.

“Lily, is it really you!? I thought I recognized that barrier, but I still wasn’t sure. I can’t believe you’re out here...” The person Kaori had called Lily was, in fact, the princess of the Heiligh Kingdom, Liliana S. B. Heiligh.

Liliana breathed a sigh of relief and pushed back her hood to reveal dazzling blond hair and sparkling blue eyes. She looked at Kaori in admiration and whispered something to her.



“I didn’t expect to see you here either, Kaori. Thank goodness you were passing by, though. It seems my luck hasn’t run out just yet.”

“Lily? What’s happened...” Kaori looked worriedly at her friend. As if just noticing something, Liliana covered her face with the cowl once more. She then put a finger to Kaori’s lips and implored her not to use her real name.

It appeared she’d been traveling incognito, without taking any attendants. Kaori’s expression grew grim. Something serious must have happened for Liliana to embark on such a dangerous journey. The two of them looked at each other for a few seconds.

“Kaori, have you finished healing everyone?” Hajime walked up to the two of them and asked Kaori that.

Liliana hadn’t heard him coming and squealed in surprise upon hearing a voice right next to her. She stared at Hajime for a few seconds before recognition dawned on her.

“You must be Nagumo-san, correct? It’s been a while. Shizuku told me you were still alive. It must have taken an unbelievable strength of will to escape the labyrinth. I’m glad you survived. It hurt to see how sad Kaori looked when she thought you were dead.”

“Lily! Did you really have to bring that up!?”

“Fufu... I heard about your confession from Shizuku, too. You should tell me all about the *adventures* you’ve had later.”

Kaori blushed and Liliana smiled at Hajime from beneath her hood.

Most people couldn’t resist her smile. It had grown famous throughout the kingdom. Men and woman, old and young, were all captivated by how dazzling it was.

However, Hajime didn’t seem affected by it at all. He gazed suspiciously at Liliana and asked her a question, his words echoing his confusion.

“Wait, who are you?”

“Huh?”

Kaori and Liliana had been friends even when Hajime was still in the capital. In fact, Liliana had made an effort to talk to all of the members of the hero party at least once. Since Hajime hadn’t been looked favorably upon by the others, she hadn’t had as many chances to talk to him. Still, they’d conversed a few times when he’d been with Kaori.

Liliana wasn’t used to being forgotten. Not only was she royalty, her affable personality made her memorable to most people. And so, she was honestly stunned when Hajime didn’t recognize her. Due to that, she stared at Hajime with a dumbfounded expression on her face.

Kaori stepped in, explaining in place of Liliana. She whispered in

Hajime's ear, since Liliana had told her she didn't want her identity revealed to the caravan.

"H-Hajime-kun! She's the princess! The princess of Heiligh! Liliana! You've talked to her before, remember!?"

".....Oh....."

"*Hic...* I never knew being forgotten could hurt so much... *Hic...*"

"Lily, don't cry! Hajime-kun's just a bit, you know, dense. No normal person would ever forget you! Please don't cry!"

"Hey, did you just insult me?" Hajime hadn't expected Kaori of all people to just casually insult him like that. Even more surprising, Kaori snapped back with "Shut up for a bit, Hajime-kun!"

"No, no, it's fine, Kaori. I shouldn't be thinking so highly of myself anyway." Liliana smiled bravely, and Hajime found he couldn't really say anything back to that. Besides, it was his fault in the first place for forgetting about her.

Yue and the others walked up to Hajime, along with the leader of the merchants. To Hajime's surprise, he recognized the man.

"It's been some time, hasn't it...? You seem to be in good health."

"You're the energy drink guy..."

"Energy drink? I do sell those, among other things, but... I don't think my energy drinks in particular are all that famous..."

"Ah, sorry, just talking to myself. Your name was More, right?"

"Indeed. I'm honored you remember me. More Nos, of the Nos Trading Company at your service. This is the second time you've saved me from certain death. I'm beginning to think we're connected by fate." The leader of this merchant caravan was none other than the same one that Hajime had escorted from Brooke to Fuhren, More Nos.

He still remembered that trip well. It was there that he'd learned just how far the merchants of this world were willing to go to make a sale. His mercantile spirit hadn't waned one bit, and he thumbed the ring on Hajime's finger as he shook his hand. It looked like he still hadn't given up on buying Hajime's Treasure Trove off him.

Shea explained to Kaori and Liliana how they knew More, which caused the princess to sink further into depression.

"He remembers someone he met just once... but not me... the princess..." she mumbled.

Kaori tried everything she could to cheer Liliana up, while Hajime continued his discussion with More.

It turned out he was en-route to Ankaji via Horaud. Everyone had heard of Ankaji's plight by now, and More was hoping to make a huge profit selling the starving city food. He'd already finished one trip. Then, he'd gone back to acquire more food from the capital and was on his way back now. Judging from his smug expression, Hajime guessed he'd already made quite a profit from his first trip.

On the other hand, Hajime and his comrades were on their way to the Haltina woods. However, they were planning on passing through Horaud and Fuhren first. Horaud was on the way and they needed to tell Ilwa that they'd successfully reunited Myu with her mother in Fuhren. As they would both need to pass through Horaud, More asked Hajime if he'd be willing to guard them until then.

However, Liliana interrupted them.

"My apologies, good merchant, but I would like to hire their services myself. I understand I'm being presumptuous, especially as you were so kind as to let me join your convoy, but..."

"Oh, do you no longer need to go to Horaud?"

"Yes, this is far enough. Of course, I will still pay you the full fee."

It seemed Liliana had originally planned on going to Horaud too. However, now that she'd found Hajime and his friends, there was no need.

Hajime wasn't sure he'd like what Liliana had to ask, but he knew if he said anything now Kaori would just yell at him for being mean to the princess, so he held his tongue.

"I see... I'm happy to know I was of assistance. You don't have to worry about paying me."

"Huh? But I can't just not pay you..." Liliana seemed at a loss. The caravan had provided her with food and lodging, and she couldn't imagine not repaying them for their hospitality. In fact, she'd been expecting him to ask for more than the usual since she'd promised to pay him upon reaching Horaud and not up-front.

However, More simply smiled at her.

"I doubt I'll ever say those words again... Let me give you one piece of advice before you go. Normally, you pay up-front when asking to join a caravan. If someone doesn't ask to see your money right away, then they're either up to no good, or they have their own reasons for not wanting to take your money. Fortunately for you, this time it was the latter."

"Wait, does that mean..."

"I have no idea why someone of your standing needs to sneak out of the capital, but I have no doubt it is a matter of utmost importance. If I didn't assist you in your time of need, then I could hardly call myself a proud citizen of Heiligh. I may be a merchant, but I'm a patriot too."

So he knew from the start... Despite that, he hadn't revealed Liliana's identity, and had tried to help her to the best of his abilities.

"In that case, I owe you my gratitude. It was only thanks to you that I was able to leave the capital."

"I see. I'm sorry to change the topic so suddenly, but do you know what it is that merchants want most, but find hardest to obtain?"

“Huh? No, I don’t.”

“It’s trust.”

“Trust?”

“Yes, trust. Without it, we would be unable to conduct any business. At the root of every merchant’s profits lies a relationship built on trust. Furthermore, even if a merchant finds themselves bereft of money, as long as they have the trust of others they won’t be ruined. After our little trip, would you not say the Nos Trading Company is worthy of your trust? If you do, then I’ve already made a far greater profit than any amount of money you could provide me.”

Liliana smiled to herself. He certainly knew how to give a speech. If she paid him now, it would be the same as saying she didn’t trust him. Her thanks would have the opposite effect of what she intended.

Liliana pulled back her cowl and looked More in the eyes.

“Your company is one I would trust with my life. I swear that I, Liliana S. B. Heiligh, will never forget the kindness you have shown me. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

“You are far too kind.”

More, along with the rest of his merchants, bowed deeply to Liliana.

After all that, More left Liliana in Hajime’s care and continued down the road to Horaus. Just before they were out of sight, he turned around and yelled one final warning to Hajime. More had heard that Hajime was now a heretic, but despite that he chose to believe in the man who’d saved his life twice. He informed Hajime that something sinister was happening in the capital, and that he should be careful. In return, Hajime told More that his party had purified Ankaji’s oasis and that they were no longer in dire need of food. That was all the information More needed to guess as to why the Holy Church had turned against Hajime. He left with a final “If you ever find yourself in need of supplies for your journey, please come to the Nos Trading Company first.” *He really is a merchant through and through.*

Once More left, Hajime and the others took Liliana back to Brise and asked her what she’d come for. The tension in her voice did not bode well, and Hajime was worried he’d get dragged into something he didn’t want again. However, the first thing she said took him completely by surprise.

“Aiko-san... has been kidnapped.” This was far worse than anything Hajime could have imagined.

Liliana explained her story to the shocked party.

For a while, Lilliana had been worried about how strained the atmosphere in the palace was. Her father, the king, had been spending more and more time with the pope, and had grown far more religious.

He'd oftentimes praise Ehit during meals or conversations, and his piety influenced the ministers and nobles to become more religious as well.

Liliana had kept trying to tell herself that it was just a side-effect of all the time he was spending with the Holy Church officials. Humans needed to be united in this time of crisis, or the demons would overrun them, she thought. However, things steadily got worse. Many of the soldiers started looking listless, as if someone had sucked out their souls. Whenever she asked any of the knights how they were doing, they'd always reply that they were fine, but to her they all looked seriously ill.

She'd then tried to consult Meld, the knight she trusted most in the palace, but he had seemingly vanished. He still showed up to Kouki and the others' training from time to time, but whenever she managed to catch a glimpse of him there, he'd vanish before she could talk to him. In the end, she never got a chance to see him.

It was then that Aiko had returned to the capital. She'd given the king a report on what had transpired at Ur.

Liliana had been in the audience chamber at the time and had heard the whole story. At that point, an emergency vote had been held.

That was when they'd decided to declare Hajime a heretic. They ignored Aiko's protests, the fact that he'd saved both an entire city and the hero party, and declared him an enemy of mankind.

Liliana had naturally found the vote absurd, and had said as much to her father. However, the king seemed convinced that Hajime was an enemy of Ehit. His hate was so vehement that Liliana feared he was possessed. As a matter of fact, he had claimed Liliana herself was lacking in faith when she even mentioned the possibility that Hajime was innocent. As the meeting progressed, he began to look at his own daughter as if she were the enemy.

Terrified, Liliana had pretended to agree with her father and fled his chambers. She'd run to Aiko, hoping to share her worries with the teacher.

Aiko had told her she planned on telling her students what Hajime had told her about the gods and the true goal of his journey during dinner. She'd expressed her hopes that Liliana would join them.

So that evening, Liliana had headed for the dining hall where the students took their meals. On the way there, she'd heard Aiko arguing with someone. She'd peeked out from the edge of the hallway to see what was going on, and watched as a silver-haired nun incapacitated Aiko and took her away.

Liliana had been terrified of that nun, and hidden herself in a nearby guest room. Once inside, she'd entered a secret passage that

only royalty knew about.

The nun had come looking for her, but had been unable to find her. Fortunately for Liliana, the passage had been an artifact that hid the presence of whoever was in it. Liliana knew she had to tell someone. The nun was clearly behind the strange atmosphere she'd been feeling in the castle. Or if not behind it, working for whoever was.

However, she knew if Aiko had been taken that the students would likely be under surveillance. And Captain Meld was still nowhere to be found.

After a lot of worrying, Liliana had decided to turn to the one friend she knew who was outside the palace.

Kaori. Plus, she knew that Kaori would have to be traveling with Hajime. Those two were the only people left that she knew she could rely on, so she'd followed the secret passage out of the castle and tried to find someone willing to take her to Ankaji.

She'd picked Ankaji because she knew the Zengen family would be willing to help her. On top of that, they were far enough from the capital that they were likely still unaffected by the darkness that hung over it. And more than anything, she guessed that there was a good chance she'd run into Kaori there.

"After that, I joined More Nos' caravan and traveled with him out of the capital. I didn't think he'd recognize me straight away, or that we'd be attacked by bandits, or that the people I'd set out to meet would be the ones to save me, though. A few weeks ago, I would have said that this was all because Ehit was watching over me. But now... I'm... afraid of the Holy Church. I don't know what's happening anymore. I have no idea who that silver-haired nun is... or what's wrong with my father..." Liliana hugged her knees and trembled in fear. Right now she looked less like the wise and confident princess she was reputed to be and more like an ordinary, frightened girl. Hajime couldn't blame her though. Everyone she knew and loved had either gone insane or was missing.

Kaori hugged Liliana tight. That was all she could do right now to ease her friend's worries.

Hajime mentally shook his head. Liliana's story had borne a surprising resemblance to the visions they'd seen in the Sunken Ruins of Melusine. One by one, Ehit was starting to possess people. Things were not looking good.

Under most circumstances, Hajime would have just washed his hands of this and said it had nothing to do with him. He would simply have sped up his schedule, conquered all the labyrinths as quickly as possible, and left this world without a second thought.

However, Hajime could more or less guess why Aiko had been

kidnapped. He couldn't say this had nothing to do with him. Someone affiliated with the Holy Church had likely taken her because she'd tried to tell the others what Hajime had told her. Ehit likely didn't want his own pawns, Kouki and the others, to stop following his script.

She'd been kidnapped because Hajime had tried to use her for his own gain.

Seeing as they'd kidnapped her, Hajime doubted they intended to kill her any time soon. Still, he didn't want to imagine what kinds of things they might do to her. After all, the so-called gods had no qualms about manipulating people like pawns. He doubted they'd shy away from torture.

More than anything, he owed his current happiness to Aiko. She was the one who had advised him to change the way he lived his life. Even if her kidnapping wasn't his fault, he wouldn't have abandoned her.

That was why he knew there was only one option.

"Guess we've gotta save Sensei." Hajime made his decision. *I won't abandon her. This isn't someone else's problem, but mine.*

Liliana looked up at him, relief flooding her face. She had been expecting him to refuse. Shizuku had told her how he'd said that the people of this world, and even his own classmates, meant nothing to him anymore. She'd been mentally preparing herself for a long debate.

"You'll come back to help?" Liliana asked one more time, just to be sure. Hajime just shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't misunderstand. I don't give a damn about the kingdom. I'm only going back to save Sensei. It's my fault she got kidnapped in the first place, and even if it wasn't, I do owe her."

"Aiko-san's..."

While it was unfortunate that he cared nothing for her kingdom, it didn't change the fact that he would come back with her. Liliana was content to settle for that.

Hajime's next words brought a smile to her face.

"And, well, if whatever's messing up the palace tries to get in the way of me saving Sensei, I'll beat the shit out of it for you."

"You'll... Fufu. In that case, I pray it does try to get in your way. Thank you so much for agreeing to help, Nagumo-san."

Aiko had been kidnapped by a nun. That, plus the strange fanaticism of the king told Hajime that chances were the Holy Church was behind this.

Saving Aiko would almost inevitably entail fighting against them. Hajime knew that too. In other words, he understood that accompanying Liliana back to the capital would mean he'd end up having to save her kingdom in the process.

The corners of Hajime's mouth inched upward as he watched Liliana and Kaori smile at each other.

He had a secondary reason for going to back to the capital, too. After all, the Divine Mountain housed its very own labyrinth. In other words, an ancient magic that he needed was in there. However, he had absolutely no idea where that labyrinth's entrance was. Searching the area would be difficult with all the priests and clergy running around.

It was because he hadn't wanted to start a fight with the Holy Church just yet that he'd decided to ignore the mountain and head for Haltina first. With the situation being what it was, though, he had ample reason to conquer the mountain immediately.

Rescuing Aiko would put him in direct opposition with the Holy Church. In which case, it made sense to launch a pre-emptive strike against them. Plus, he'd be able to get his hands on ancient magic that he'd need eventually anyway. It was killing two birds with one stone.

The silver-haired nun Liliana had spoken of reminded Hajime of the hooded figure who'd been by King Aleister's side in Melusine's visions. When they'd disappeared below the deck with the king, Hajime distinctly remembered seeing a flash of silver hair. He wasn't sure if they were the same person. After all, centuries had passed since then. For some reason though, Hajime had a feeling they were. And he was sure that they'd soon find themselves at odds with each other.

He was raring for this fight. The monster incubated in the abyss was thirsting for blood. Anything that stood in his way would die, no exceptions.

He broke into the same fearless grin he had whenever he was up against grim odds.

"Hajime, you're amazing."

"Hawawa, Hajime-san's making that face again. I'm falling for him all over!"

"Hm, Master. If you keep grinning at me like that.. my panties are going to get soaked."

The trio of girls drooling over Hajime ended up ruining the tense atmosphere he was building up.

Let's turn back the clock to a few days before Liliana met up with Hajime and the others.

A lone figure stood near the outskirts of the royal palace. They were in an empty, quiet clearing. It was a solemn place, the silence punctured only by the night breeze. Crisp moonlight illuminated the area.

Truthfully, the figure was standing in a graveyard. However, as it was near the palace, it was no mere graveyard for the masses. There was a single stone monument carved directly out of the mountainside.

A towering edifice that immortalized the sacrifices of the brave souls who'd given their lives for this kingdom. All those who died in battle for the kingdom had their names engraved there.

The man standing in front of the grave was Heiligh's knight captain, Meld Loggins. Though his expression was neutral, there was a deep sadness in his eyes.

This late at night, the only people wandering the palace grounds were the soldiers on patrol, but none of them passed through this graveyard.

That, of course, made this quiet graveyard the perfect meeting place for clandestine activities.

"Captain." The whisper was so quiet it was nearly snatched away by the wind. Meld turned around and saw the man he was waiting for. The newcomer walked up without making a sound. His name was Jose Rancaid. He was the vice-commander of the knights, and Meld's right-hand man.

"Were you followed?"

"No, I didn't meet a soul on the way here. Still, it would be unwise to linger too long."

"We certainly wouldn't want people starting rumors that the two most important knights in the kingdom are plotting something, especially considering the current state of the court. The ministers all suspect even their own shadows."

Meld smiled bitterly, which Jose reciprocated.

"How are the soldiers?" Meld asked, his expression serious once more. Jose's expression didn't inspire confidence. In fact, he was pale.

"Including the captains, over sixty percent of the soldiers are showing signs of 'Hollowness.'" The Hollowness Jose referred to was a strange phenomenon that had appeared over the past few days. It had spread quickly through the ranks of common foot soldiers and knights. Put simply, the Hollowness was some strange affliction that made them lethargic.

They still continued doing their jobs, and responded to direct questions. However, they were clearly more listless than usual, and none of those affected by it smiled. They became social recluses, leaving their room only to work.

The epidemic had spread fast, and now it was affecting even nobles and commanders.

Naturally, Meld had launched an investigation as to the cause of the matter. He was worried about his men, and feared that this was worse than simple lethargy.

"Already? I should be thankful only 10 percent of my knights are affected. That, and none of my captains seem ill yet."

"But Captain. I'm not quite sure how to put this... but should we

really assume this is an enemy attack? Could it not simply be that the men are burnt out?" Jose's tone was hesitant.

"Kouki's been beaten, we've lost many of our best knights, and the demons have overturned the numbers advantage we had over them. Do you really think this is a coincidence? I understand how you feel, Jose, but blind optimism will get you killed."

"My apologies." Jose was by no means being optimistic. It was his job as Meld's confidante to offer alternate viewpoints and contradict any potential flaws in his boss' reasoning. And so, Jose cleared his throat and continued.

"How are things on your end, Captain? Has the king been affected as well?"

"His Highness is still safe for now. He shows no symptoms of Hollowness. If anything, he seems more lively than ever. He swears by Ehit that he won't let the demons' atrocities continue. However..."

"What is it?" Jose wasn't used to seeing his boss hesitate.

Meld tried to search for the right words. In the end, he wasn't able to find them and he shook his head.

"It's nothing." He could hardly tell his vice-captain that the king was *too* religious. It would be blasphemy, both to Jose and to his own faith.

"The prime minister seems unaffected as well. However, some of the influential nobles haven't been so lucky." Jose staggered as Meld rattled off a list of people who'd become Hollow. The nobles who were integral to the government's continued operation were fortunately still safe, but many other highly powerful people had been laid low.

"I've given His Highness a full report, and he's guarded by a contingent of knights 24/7. I don't trust the templar knights or the royal guard. My men have orders to come see me the moment they sense anything even slightly out of the ordinary."

"What does His Highness have to say about the Hollowness?" Meld had informed King Eliheid there was a possibility that this was a mental attack orchestrated by some unknown enemy.

Even if it was just apathy, the numbers spoke for themselves. Meld was certain this required a swift response. However, the king had not met his expectations.

"The fact that the two of us are meeting in secret here's answer enough, isn't it?"

"He rejected your request to start an investigation, didn't he?"

The king had indeed ordered Meld to stop worrying about foolish things like apathetic soldiers and to start building up the country's army.

Though he was forbidden from conducting an investigation, Meld

couldn't let it go. His instincts were telling him that this Hollowness was dangerous. That was why he was operating in secret with his vice-captain.

"The demons have grown more powerful than ever. His Highness has more important concerns than unmotivated soldiers and some vague hints that it might be an epidemic."

"Still, the king heeds your words, Captain. Normally he'd never dismiss your concerns out of hand..."

Meld cut Jose off with a look. Though the Eliheid may have been acting strange recently, Meld didn't want to hear any insults against the king. He was, at heart, a loyal man.

"That's why we need to gather proof. Jose, talk to all of the dark magic experts you know. Figure out what this Hollowness really is, and devise countermeasures. Also, try and convince the guards to open up the royal vault. Surely we have an artifact in there that can deal with mental attacks like this. At the very least, get a catalog of items from the vault manager."

"Yes, sir. What about Kouki-kun and his friends?"

"Let me worry about them. They're in a delicate state right now. I didn't want to burden them with more worries than I had to, but... I suppose I have no choice but to tell them now. I'm really not cut out to be a teacher." Meld sighed, and Jose smiled at him.

"I'm sure those kids understand how hard you're trying."

"Who cares if they understand me. The problem is that I don't understand them. It's honestly my biggest worry still. Fighting's so much easier than this."

"Still, I think it would ease some of their worries if you talked to them."

Prospective knights applied knowing what they were getting into, so Meld's way of cheering up his men usually consisted of training them until they collapsed and then sharing a few drinks. It usually worked. However, he knew that wouldn't be a good idea for Kouki and the others. They were students who'd been dragged against their will into his world's war, and they were only fighting to go back home.

He had no idea how to help those kids come to terms with the fact that they'd have to kill. Jose snickered. Meld was acting just like a father who didn't know how to teach his kids.

The two of them talked for a bit longer about less pressing matters. Once they gave each other their respective reports, they melted away into the darkness.

Meld snuck back to his room while keeping an eye out for patrols. As he was the knight commander, no one would challenge him even if they did spot him, but he didn't want anyone wondering what it was

he'd been doing out this late at night.

I can't believe I'm acting like an intruder in the palace I'm supposed to protect. Meld smiled to himself. A second later though, his heart leaped into his throat as someone called out to him.

"Captain Meld—" He looked around, but saw no one. Despite the fact that he'd been on high alert, someone had managed to sneak up on him. In fact, they'd gotten so close that they were able to tap his shoulder. In other words, they could have killed him had they so chosen to.

"Zaaah!" His overblown reaction was a symptom of how nervous he was. The moment he felt a hand on his shoulder, he pulled out his sword. It drew a silver arc through the air as he turned it on his assailant.

"Hiii!?" His sword met only empty air, though. Whoever had snuck up on him had good enough reflexes to dodge out of the way in time.

Or well, at least trip over himself. He looked down to find his attacker in tears.

"K-Kousuke!?" The boy Meld had mistaken for his attacker was indeed Kousuke Endou, the scout of the hero party. He was nodding, terrified.

"C-Captain. D-Did I do something to make you mad?" Realizing his mistake, Meld hurriedly sheathed his sword and helped Kousuke up.

Everyone knew how difficult it was to notice Kousuke. Even when his friends were talking with him, they'd sometimes forget he was there. Back in Japan, automatic doors often wouldn't even open for him. Furthermore, he was almost always forgotten during role call in class. He was a natural master of stealth.

Meld understood now why he hadn't sensed anyone.

"N-No, sorry. I was just surprised to find someone behind me and kind of..."

"You sound like Golgo, Captain."

You "kind of" almost chopped my head off! Meld cleared his throat and changed the subject.

"Anyway, what are you doing out so late, Kousuke?"

"After practice today, I fell asleep in my room. We went pretty hard, and I was exhausted. But it was still pretty early, and..."

Meld looked pityingly down at his pupil. He could tell where this was going.

"And no one thought to wake me up for dinner or anything, so I slept until now."

"I-I see."

"When I finally woke up, I hurried over to the dining hall, but

everyone had already finished eating. They'd noticed there was an extra meal laid out, but they thought the chefs had made more by mistake and ate it. No one even realized I didn't come to dinner."

"I-I see."

"Well, I guess it was partly my fault for not arriving on time. I felt guilty about asking the servants to make food just for me and I figured skipping just one meal wouldn't be a big deal. But then I got so hungry I couldn't sleep... which is why I figured I'd go to the kitchens to see if they had anything. I found some vegetable scraps leftover and ate those, but..."

"But?"

"Whatever they were, they didn't sit well with my stomach... I spent two hours fighting in the bathroom. You really don't want to go in there right now."

"What a night..."

"Anyway, once I finished, I realized there was another problem."

"Your story's not over yet!? And what on earth is in that bathroom!?"

"It's not what's in there, but what isn't. There wasn't any toilet paper."

"....."

Kousuke didn't explain how he eventually did manage to find some toilet paper, but considering how far from the kitchens he was now, Meld guessed he must have spent a long time searching for it.

"Kousuke... go rest."

"Will do. Good night, Captain."

He'd been forgotten, had his dinner eaten by someone else, gotten sick off the leftovers he'd found, and then spent the night wandering the halls looking for toilet paper only to nearly be killed by his teacher. Meld felt for the poor boy.

As he watched Kousuke totter off to his room, Meld gave him a crisp salute.



Meld made it the rest of the way back to his room without incident. He heaved a heavy sigh and put his sword up on the stand on the wall. After disarming, he flopped himself onto his sofa and massaged his temples.

Once he'd rested for a while, he started planning.

"Magic that only affects troops' morale... It would make sense that demons are behind it, but I can't believe they've infiltrated the capital already. And if they have, why not try something bolder than just hitting our morale? And why only target our rank and file soldiers? If they can cast spells undetected into the palace, why not come for me? Killing me would remove a powerful enemy *and* lower their morale anyway. So why? What on earth is going on?" Meld spoke his thoughts aloud. He was still extremely worried about this unknown threat that had wormed its way into the palace. He wasn't exactly at his limits, but the constant planning and worrying had been taking its toll. Doubly so since his fellow palace officials didn't seem to share his concerns.

Worse, the problems kept on piling up. He could feel his impatience permeating every inch of his thoughts, like an ink stain spreading through paper.

"I wonder what he's up to right now?" Meld thought back to the boy he'd been reunited with in the Orcus Labyrinth. The boy he'd believed he'd failed to protect. The boy who'd used legendary medicine to save his life.

After reminiscing for a few minutes, Meld stood up and walked over to his desk. Then, he pulled out two pieces of paper and as many envelopes. Looking conflicted, he began to write.

He needed to be ready for the worst. The first letter was addressed to the duke of Ankaji. The second, to Hajime. He was hoping Duke Zengen would know how to get in touch with Hajime and pass it on. This way, even if something happened to him, the kingdom would have a fighting chance.

Glimmering moonlight illuminated his room as he wrote away.

He finished writing and started going over the letters again. Just then, he heard a knock on the door.

Meld warily grabbed his sword off the wall and asked who was at the door.

"Who is it?"

"Umm, it's me, Captain Meld. Hiyama."

"Daisuke? What are you doing up at this hour?"

"Well... there's something I really need your advice on."

Wondering what could have made the boy sound so desperate, Meld slowly opened the door. Hiyama stood in the hallway, his head

bowed low.

“You said you needed my advice but... why this late at night?”

“I’m sorry. I know I’m being a bother... but I don’t want any of my classmates to overhear this.”

“I see... Well, it’s no trouble for me. Come in.” Meld thought he had a good idea of what Hiyama needed advice on, and invited the boy into his room.

Hiyama’s standing among his classmates was tenuous. It was his own carelessness that had nearly gotten Hajime killed. He’d apologized profusely for the incident, and the other students had all agreed not to bring it up again too, so no one blamed him for anything. Still, that was only on the surface. Most generally kept their distance from him.

Especially now that they’d all learned Hajime was alive.

Meld was a little worried about his relationship with the others too, so he was actually glad Hiyama had come to him for advice. At least, that was what Meld assumed Hiyama had come for.

Hiyama kept his head bowed low, so Meld couldn’t make out his expression. However, Meld didn’t like what he saw. Hiyama seemed on the verge of doing something drastic.

Meld ushered the boy over to his sofa. He waited patiently, but Hiyama didn’t say anything. The boy simply sat there, wringing his hands and tapping his foot.

“Daisuke, I think I know what it is you wanted to talk about. You don’t have to sugarcoat anything. Give it to me straight. Tell me what’s troubling you and we can come up with a solution together.” Meld’s reassuring words did nothing to ease Hiyama’s apparent nerves. He still kept his head bowed, unwilling to meet Meld’s eyes.

This must have been eating away at him more than I thought. Meld tried to reassure him again.

However, before he could get more than a few words out, he heard another knock at his door. *I sure am getting a lot of visitors today.* He called out to ask who it was.

Surprisingly, it was Jose’s voice that answered him. It appeared he had an emergency report to make.

His timing couldn’t have been any worse. Hiyama was still in Meld’s room, and it was entirely possible what Jose had to report was something Meld didn’t want the students to hear.

Hiyama noticed Meld’s hesitation.

“It’s fine, Captain Meld. I’ll just wait in the hallway until you’re done.”

“If you’re sure... Sorry, Daisuke.”

“It’s fine,” Hiyama replied curtly, and stood up.

Meld walked to the door and turned the knob. The door opened

with a soft click. Standing in the hallway was Jose, but he'd gone Hollow.

Meld felt goosebumps run down his back. His instincts screamed at him to run.

"Ah!?" he gasped, and leaped backward. A second later, a knight's sword whistled through the air where he'd been standing.

"Jose, what's gotten into you!?" Meld yelled out to his vice-captain. The only response he got was a diagonal slash aimed at him. Meld rolled out of the way, pulled his sword free, and blocked Jose's follow-up attack. The two swords met with a resounding clang.

"Shit, so it was a form of brainwashing after all!?" Up close, Meld could tell Jose's eyes were blank. It was one of the symptoms of Hollowness. However, the other Hollow soldiers hadn't ever tried to attack him, which meant that Jose was following someone's orders, and that all other Hollow soldiers could be made to do the same.

Meld shivered. *I knew it wasn't something as innocent as apathy!* In order to cure Jose of his brainwashing, Meld first needed to immobilize him. He yelled loudly and shoved Jose's sword back.

"This might hurt a little, old friend!" Meld rushed at Jose. Jose was off-balance after having his sword repelled, and Meld hoped he could pin his vice-captain in place with a tackle.

However, Jose didn't move according to the plan. Since he'd been attacking Meld thus far, Meld had assumed he was the target. However, Jose now ignored Meld and turned his gaze to Hiyama, who was staring at the two of them, dumbfounded.

Jose's sudden change of target made Meld hesitate for a second. He turned to see Hiyama take a few steps back and trip over himself. Meld couldn't believe it.

Hiyama was one of the frontliners of the hero party. Moreover, he had an extremely powerful job. He shouldn't have lost his courage when faced with a single measly knight. *No, wait, maybe this was what he wanted to talk to me about!* Meld clicked his tongue and changed directions.

His legs screamed in pain as he pivoted without losing momentum. The sudden change in direction required him to step with so much force that his floorboards snapped, but he managed to get himself in between Jose and Hiyama.

"Ngh... Such power." Their swords met in a flash of sparks. Because of his sudden shift in direction, Meld's stance was in tatters. Still, even after taking that into account, Jose's blows were more powerful than they had any right to be. Meld's arms went numb as they absorbed the impact of the blow.

Jose was definitely a master of the sword. However, his style favored speed over strength. Technique and agility were his weapons,

not raw power. Yet somehow, the blows he was raining down were a match for Meld's.

Plus, Meld couldn't dodge, since he was covering for Hiyama. He couldn't push Jose back either, since his stance was all wrong. His full strength was utterly out of reach. *I've got no other choice. I'll have to use magic.*

"Sorry about this, vice-captain!" There was a risk of him severely injuring his right-hand man, but he put his faith in Jose's resilience. Meld held out his free hand and prepared to fire a blast of wind at point-blank range.

"Heed my call, O wind— Blitz—!?" However, he never got a chance to finish his spell. He stopped chanting midway... when a sword stabbed into his side.

"Daisuke?"

"Tch... I can't believe you managed to dodge that."

Meld turned around, his disbelief evident. However, just as he'd thought, the person who'd thrust the sword into his side was none other than Hiyama. Moreover, his eyes weren't blank. They were bloodshot.

"Daisuke, you..." Meld didn't know all the details, but he was certain that Hiyama had something to do with the Hollowness that had been spreading through his men's ranks. If Meld hadn't dodged to the side at the last minute, Hiyama's sword would have pierced his heart. He had his uncanny instincts to thank for his survival. Hiyama had aimed for the kill.

He ignored Meld's question, yanked his sword out, and once again tried to drive it into Meld's heart.

"Blitz Hammer!" The mana from Meld's unfinished spell was still primed, so he called out the trigger that would cast it. He aimed not at Hiyama, but at the floor below him. A compressed ball of wind slammed into the floorboards with tremendous force. Fragments of wood struck all three of them. The following gust of wind blew all three of them away in different directions.

Meld rolled across the floor, a trail of blood leaking out behind him. The pain was so intense that he should have fainted, but Meld stood up as if his wound didn't even hurt, then charged at Hiyama.

Jose was just a knight, but Hiyama was a frontliner who'd delved deeper into the Great Orcus Labyrinth than Meld ever had. He was definitely the more dangerous foe.

Unfortunately for Meld, even more enemies joined the fray. A horde of Hollow soldiers poured into his room.

"Tch... Looks like they planned this well." Meld swept aside three soldiers' blades with one stroke of his sword. He then stepped to the side, avoiding Jose's overhand slice. Hiyama then rushed forward and

launched a furious assault, which Meld parried with the flat of his blade.

Following up on that attack, Meld blew away the soldiers that had circled to his rear with another blast of wind. He'd shortened the spell's incantation so much that all he had to say was the spell's name. Taking advantage of the opening caused by the spell, Jose swung his sword down on Meld's rear, but Meld kicked a chair into him, tripping him.

Irritated, Hiyama tried to chant a spell, but that distracted his attention for a moment.

Meld had been waiting for this moment. His blade danced through the air, circling around Hiyama's short sword. He slapped the weapon out of Hiyama's hand and rushed forward.

"Haaah!"

"Ah!?"

Meld ducked under Jose's and tackled Hiyama.

His shoulder connected squarely with Hiyama's stomach, and the air was driven out of Hiyama's lungs as he slammed into the sofa and tumbled over it.

Two of the soldiers tried to pincer Meld, but he rolled underneath them and blocked Jose's next attack with his sword. The blow sent him flying backward, but he used the distance he gained to straighten his stance.

"Scatter— Wind Wall!" With the precious seconds he'd gained, he summoned a barrier of wind to protect him.

Jose, who'd been in the middle of launching another attack, was knocked off-balance.

Meld then blocked one of the soldier's swings and threw an uppercut at another. Though the soldiers' blows were powerful, their movements were clumsy. He knew he could handle them. Meld's uppercut connected squarely with a soldier's jaw and knocked him clean off his feet.

The captain then swept his leg out, tripping Jose. And while the soldier was still stumbling, Meld slammed the flat of his sword into the man's head. There was a sickening crunch, and the soldier fell to the ground.

"Come on, Jose, I know you can do better than that." Normally, Jose fought with a lot more finesse, but right now he was letting his weapon swing him around. Meld parried another one of his blows and threw the man over his shoulder.

Jose gasped as the air was forced out of his lungs.

"You stay quiet for a bit." Meld slammed his fist into Jose's stomach. The man spasmed, then went limp. Meld spared him one last glance before standing up and punching behind him.

The last remaining soldier was blown away.

“Goddammit. I even brought the vice-captain over to deal with you. How’s someone from this world so strong? Are you some kinda monster?” Hiyama coughed and stumbled to his feet. Meld looked sadly over at his former pupil.

“You overestimate me. I just have a lot more experience fighting people. I *am* still the kingdom’s greatest knight, you know? You may have me beat when it comes to fighting monsters, but I’ve had years of experience fighting people.” *So please, just surrender.* Sadly, his unspoken plea didn’t reach Hiyama. The young boy tore at his hair and glanced at the unconscious soldiers.

“What, you think you’ve already won?” Hiyama sounded completely insane. Meld gasped as he saw the look in the boy’s eyes. He knew that look. It was the broken look of a man who’d fallen too far to have any hope of salvation.

“Daisuke, what did—” Meld broke off when he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. He couldn’t believe it.

They were standing back up. Both the soldiers, and Jose. It was as if they didn’t feel any pain. They simply got back up with the same blank expression as before.

“Give it up. Hehehe... Those guys won’t stop even if you kill them!”

“What? What have you done to—” Before Meld could finish his question, two more knights walked into his room. There were at least half a dozen more standing outside it, all of them Hollow.

Whatever brainwashing magic had been used on them, it was extremely high-level. Even if their movements were a little sluggish, the soldiers never tired and their attacks were abnormally powerful.

Suddenly, it hit him.

Despite how loud their fight had been, no one had come to see what was going on. Meld finally realized how dire his situation was. He’d completely fallen into his enemy’s trap. There was likely some barrier around his room that kept the sound and vibrations from escaping. Chances were no one even knew he was under attack.

They completely got me. This is what I get for putting too much faith in the castle’s defenses. He hadn’t expected his enemies to be capable of setting up such an elaborate trap in the heart of the capital. For the past few hundred years, humans and demons had been relatively equal in strength, which was why the castle’s multilayered defenses had never once been breached.

That left only one possibility. Meld looked over at Hiyama. Considering the boy’s skills, Meld knew he couldn’t have been working alone. He was almost certain Hiyama had an accomplice. Said accomplice was probably the real brains behind this operation.

In that case, this is no time to be thinking of making a valiant last stand. I need to escape alive and inform someone of this betrayal.

Unfortunately, the doorway was filled with knights. He slowly backed up. Jose and the others surrounded him.

“Just give up and die already, Captain Meld!” Hiyama’s mouth twisted into a sneer.

“I refuse. As shameful as it is, I’m afraid I’ll be escaping with my life.”

“Wha? You little—”

Meld turned on his heel and dashed for the window. He slammed through it, the glass shattering with ease. For a moment, he hung suspended in the air. Meld’s room was on the fourth floor. A fall from that height would leave him crippled at the very least.

“Wind Wall!” However, he slowed his descent with magic and landed softly on the ground below.

He knew Hiyama and the others would soon chase after him, so he hadn’t truly escaped yet. Not by a long shot.

However, he’d at least bought as much time as it would take someone to chant a high-level spell. Specifically, a very powerful fire spell.

With it, he’d be able to buy himself enough time to find someone who wasn’t brainwashed and tell them everything he knew. *I can do this!*

“O crimson—” He stopped chanting almost as soon as he started. Or rather, something stopped him. He wasn’t sure what. Hiyama and the others still hadn’t made it down yet, and there was no one else in the palace courtyard.

There was no magic stopping him from continuing, and no one had fired an attack at him.

“...” However, his instincts screamed at him to be silent. He *knew* not to make a sound or move a muscle.

It felt as if his heart was caught in a vice. Cold sweat dripped from his chin. He stood stock still, wishing his breathing and heartbeat weren’t so loud.

It was exactly like when an animal sensed a predator nearby. Meld knew his only hope for survival was to hope whatever this thing was passed him by.

“First I had to step in to take care of the king, now the knight commander. I must say, your performance is quite disappointing. I suppose this is as much as I can expect from a human. Very well, it seems I must lend you a hand...” The voice was so melodious that it sent chills down Meld’s spine. It was also utterly devoid of emotion.

Only after hearing that voice did Meld move. He slowly looked up, his head moving like a badly oiled machine.

Floating in the air, silhouetted by the moon, stood a girl. A pair of wings sprouted from her back. She created a glowing silver sphere in front of her. It looked so fantastical that for a moment, Meld couldn't believe what he was seeing was real.

However, there was no time to be impressed. His body, his mind, his very soul despaired.

There was an overwhelming difference in strength between him and this creature.

The sphere's silver light intensified. It looked like a miniature version of the moon. A very beautiful miniature version of the moon. The power stored in that light was anything but beautiful, though. It was cold and merciless.

Meld knew full well what was about to happen to him. He also knew that there was no escape.

"Ehit..." Meld, the strongest knight in the kingdom, prayed to the god he'd believed in since childhood. However—

"Correct. This is what your lord desires." Ehit didn't stop the girl from bringing the silver sphere down on him. It was no larger than the type of balls children played games with, but its light eradicated all life.

The silver light of death filled Meld's vision.

This is what Ehit wanted? He wanted me to die!? Meld thought back to what had happened to his subordinates. He was sure even worse things awaited them.

So in the final moment of his death, Meld's thoughts turned not to Ehit, but to... *Please take care of the rest for me... Well, even if I don't ask, I know you'll do it anyway. She's your enemy, after all, so—* Beat the shit out of her for me. The kingdom's strongest knight put his faith not in god, but in the monster who'd crawled his way out of the abyss.

Soldiers with Hollow eyes silently repaired the window and floorboards of Meld's room. Another figure looked down at the letters still on his desk.

"Oh my, I guess I should have expected as much from the captain. He didn't miss a thing. That was close."

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Hiyama walked up to the figure, not even attempting to hide his displeasure.

"It's nothing. At any rate, how does your stomach feel? From the looks of it, he hit you pretty hard," the figure said with a sneer.

Hiyama grimaced and spat his words back at them.

"This is nothing."

The figure's sneer grew. Hiyama turned to watch a soldier fit a new window frame in and something occurred to him.

"What about her?"

“She already left. She said our performance was disappointing.”

“I see. Well, I expected her to intervene. I’ve gotta say, it really feels like we’re blessed by god. Fufu, never expected her to be such a cruel bitch, though.” Hiyama shuddered as he thought back to the girl who had killed Meld. Originally, the plan was supposed to have taken much longer. But thanks to her help, all of the obstacles standing in their way had been removed.

Hiyama still didn’t know why she’d chosen to cooperate with them. She claimed her god had told her to, but he had no way of knowing whether that was really the truth or not.

He didn’t even know what she really was, just that she was far stronger than him.

Hiyama shook his head, shaking off the fear that started creeping up on him. He decided to change the subject.

“Well, all of the biggest problems have been solved now. At this point, we’ll be fine as long as Yaegashi doesn’t catch on.”

“Indeed. Thanks to our little accomplice, both the king and the prime minister are effectively our puppets. Plus, the Holy Church was never our enemy to begin with. With the captain gone, there’s no one left who can stop me.”

A hint of madness tinged the figure’s voice. Even Hiyama, who’d already killed someone, took an involuntary step back.

The figure crushed something inside their hand. Upon closer inspection, Hiyama realized it was a letter. The letter Meld had written to Hajime.

“Things are going to progress very fast indeed now. The ball’s rolling, and it’s only going to speed up from here. There’s no stopping now, not until we achieve the future I wish for.”

The figure grinned, and their pupils shrunk to tiny dots.

Maniacal laughter filled the late Captain Meld’s room.

Chapter II: Invasion of the Capital

A few rays of moonlight shone in through the barred window, lighting an otherwise dark cell. The stark contrast between the white light and the dark room was striking.

The furnishings in the room were rather Spartan. The floor was made of metal, and there was only a single wooden pallet, a tiny desk, and a squat toilet. Frankly, prisons back on earth were more comfortable than this cell.

Aiko leaned back against the wall, huddled up in a corner of the bed with her face buried in her knees.

Three days had passed since she'd been imprisoned here. Thanks to the bracelet strapped to her wrist, she couldn't use any magic.

At first, she'd tried all she could to escape. But even cutting herself and drawing a magic circle with her blood hadn't allowed her to cast magic. And naturally she wasn't physically strong enough to break the bars of her cell. Nor had she been able to slip past the silver-haired nun who came to bring her food. The nun was far stronger than her and had easily been able to overpower Aiko.

The bars over her window prevented her from escaping through there. The most she could do was get one arm through.

Though even if there hadn't been any bars over her window, she wouldn't have been able to escape. Her cell was at the top of a tower on the summit of the Divine Mountain. It was unlikely she could reach the ground without dying, and even if she could, the mountain was crawling with priests. Avoiding all of them and making it back to the capital was an impossible task.

In the end, Aiko had been reduced to huddling in a corner of her cell. Though she was worried about her students, there was nothing she could do for them.

"What are they trying to do to my students... What's happening..." As Aiko mumbled that to herself, she thought back to what the nun had said before kidnapping her.

Apparently, the nun's master would have found it inconvenient if Aiko had told her students what she'd learned from Hajime. The nun had wanted one of the students' plans to continue unhindered.

Worry and despair swirled around inside her mind. Aiko thought back to the boy who'd died in Ur, Yukitoshi Shimizu. She worried that another one of her students might be trying to do something they

could never take back, and she couldn't help agonizing over it.

Stuck alone in this prison, she had plenty of time to think. The more she pondered over recent events, the more she realized that there had been something wrong inside the palace when she'd returned. Eliheid and the other leaders of the kingdom had been acting strangely fanatical when she'd gone to see them.

That silver-haired nun must have done something to them. If the strange spell she'd cast on Aiko had really been some kind of mind control technique, then it stood to reason that the king and his retainers had been brainwashed.

However, neither Shizuku nor Liliana had been acting out of the ordinary. Still, there was no telling what might have happened to them in the time since she'd been captured though.

As she prayed for their safety, Aiko remembered one other thing the nun had said.

She'd said that she needed to eliminate the "irregular."

That word brought to mind a specific student of hers. The boy who'd saved her life, and the boy who'd killed Shimizu. Despite being so strong-willed, he'd still seriously considered the advice she'd given him.

And then... they'd
maybekindofnotreallysortofpossiblyalmostkissed.

As much as Aiko had tried to bury that memory, it kept surfacing when she least expected it. She blushed, despite knowing the desperate situation she was in.

Aiko shook her head, trying to banish the memory from her thoughts. She was worried for his safety, but she also really wanted to meet him again.

"Nagumo-kun..."

"Yeah? What's up, Sensei?"

"Wha!?" Aiko couldn't believe her ears. There was no way Hajime would be here right now.

She glanced around her room, but saw no one, then tilted her head. *Am I hearing things?*

It wasn't just her imagination, though. Hajime called out to her again.

"Up here, Sensei."

"Huh?" *I'm not just hearing things!* Aiko looked up at the window. Hajime was poking his face between the bars.

"Huh? What? Nagumo-kun? How? This is the top floor... on the summit... Huh?"

"Yeah, I know. Just calm down, Sensei. I need to make sure there aren't any traps here..." Hajime swept his gaze across the room, confirming with his demon eye that the space was clear. There was a

flurry of red sparks, and suddenly a hole appeared in Aiko's wall that was wide enough to let a person through.

Aiko's room was at least 100 meters from the ground. And yet, Hajime just waltzed into the room as if the ground extended past Aiko's walls.

Hajime smiled as he saw the shock on Aiko's face.

"Why do you look so surprised? I thought I was doing a pretty good job of hiding my presence, but it sounded like you knew I was already here... Made me lose confidence in myself, honestly."

"Huh? I did? How?"

"I mean, you called my name, didn't you? Wasn't that because you knew I was here?"

Naturally Aiko had known no such thing, and had only muttered his name because she'd been thinking of him. Not that she could tell Hajime that. And so, she hurriedly tried to change the topic.

"A-Anyway, why are you here..."

"To save you, of course."

"You came all the way here just to save me? Really?"

Hajime raised an eyebrow. Her odd actions made him wonder if she hadn't already been brainwashed. He walked up to her and turned his demon eye on her, just to make sure she wasn't under the influence of some strange magic.

Aiko blushed and her heart began to beat faster. The boy she'd been thinking about had happened to come save her just when she was hoping for him to, and now he was standing next to her bed staring intently at her.

If they'd had a simple teacher-student relationship, Aiko would have simply asked him what was wrong. But they didn't, so she found she could do nothing more than stare back at him.

Hajime's eyes found no traces of mana, so he decided that Aiko was likely still herself. He took her by the hand and examined her bracelet. It seemed he wanted to remove the artifact that was sealing her mana. But that wasn't what Aiko saw it as. She squealed and said some rather scandalous words.

"We can't, Nagumo-kun! This is too sudden! And I'm your teacher!"

"Don't you want to be able to use magic again? Or is there some kind of trap that'll activate if I break this? Doesn't look like there is, but..."

"Huh? Oh, that's what you were doing..."

"What did you think I was doing?"

"Ahahahaha... I'm sorry. It's nothing..."

Hajime stared quizzically at Aiko, who tried to play it off with a laugh. She once again changed the subject, asking how Hajime had

known she'd been captured.

"The princess told me."

"By the princess, do you mean Liliana?"

"Yeah. Apparently she saw you get taken. She couldn't tell Amanogawa or the others because she was worried they were under surveillance, so she slipped out of the castle to try and find us."

"So it was Liliana-san... You agreed to help her?"

"I guess. This is partly my fault, after all. I know you probably didn't want to see my face again, but... you'll just have to deal with it until we meet up with the others." Hajime smiled awkwardly, then shattered the bracelet sealing Aiko's mana and stood up.

He probably thinks that because of what happened with Shimizu-kun. Aiko grabbed on to Hajime's arm. Then, she looked directly into Hajime's eyes and told him her true feelings regarding the incident.

"I would never wish for something like that. I'm truly happy you came here to save me. It's true that I still haven't come to terms with what happened to Shimizu-kun... Honestly, I doubt I ever really will... Still, I'd like to think... that I at least understand why you pulled the trigger. I don't hate you for it, or bear any sort of grudge."

"Sensei..."

Aiko smiled, her gaze holding equal parts kindness and sadness.

"I was unable to tell you back then, so I'd like to tell you now. Thank you so much for saving my life. And I'm sorry I forced you to kill a classmate."

"....." *Looks like you were right, Yue. She figured it out.* Hajime smiled bitterly to himself. Regardless of whether or not she'd realized, it didn't change the fact that Hajime had done something terrible to her.

"I just did what I wanted to. I'll accept your thanks, but I don't need an apology. Anyway, let's get out of here. The princess should be with Amanogawa and the others right now. We'll decide what to do next after we've all met up."

"Very well. Be careful, Nagumo-kun. The Holy Church has branded you a heretic. And it's possible the person who kidnapped me is..."

"I know. There's some stuff I need to do here once I get you to safety, so I'll probably end up fighting them sooner or later. I came here knowing that." Hajime nodded, his ironclad resolve evident in his gaze.

Aiko blushed, but she quickly snapped out of her fantasies. There was one other thing she needed to warn Hajime about. Before she could though, they both heard a loud crash in the distance. The air shook.

Aiko stiffened and looked up at Hajime. He looked into the

distance, his gaze fixed on a certain point. He guessed that the commotion had come from the ground, and telepathically got a report from Yue.

"Tch, this is some pretty shitty timing... Wait, actually, this might not be that bad." Hajime clicked his tongue and turned to Aiko.

Aiko didn't know Hajime could use telepathy, but after all the artifacts of his she'd seen, she didn't doubt that he'd done something to find out what happened. She demanded an explanation with her gaze.

"Sensei, the demons have attacked. That noise was the sound of the capital's barrier being destroyed."

"Demons are attacking!? Doesn't that mean..."

"Yeah, Heiligh is under siege. My comrades told me through telepathy. They've got a huge army of monsters with them too. They caught the human army totally by surprise."

"Impossible." Aiko paled and shook her head.

Her shock was understandable. It should have been impossible for the demons to bring an army capable of invading the capital this close to the city without anyone noticing. Moreover, the barrier guarding the capital was nigh invincible. It was unthinkable that the demons had not only shattered the barrier, but had also done it without being spotted.

"For now, we need to meet up with Amanogawa and the others. We'll discuss more later."

"O-Okay."

Hajime scooped Aiko up into his arms and prepared to jump. She squealed and threw her arms around his neck. However, just then, a blinding light rained down from above.

"Ah!?" It resembled moonlight, just more intense. Hajime's instincts told him it was dangerous though, and he heeded their warning. Without even a backward glance, he leaped through the hole he'd made. He heard Aiko shriek and cling even tighter to him, but there wasn't any time to spare for her.

A second after he leaped out of Aiko's cell, the silver light blew it to pieces.

The light made a strange noise as it slammed into the stone wall. It wasn't the sound of a physical object slamming into rock, nor was it the distinctive hiss of heat melting stone. No, it sounded as if the light had simply dismantled the component parts of the wall. The top of the imposing tower blew away in the wind, its stone turned into particles finer than sand.

Hajime steadied himself in the air with Aerodynamic and muttered to himself.

"Was the tower... disintegrated?"

“Correct, Irregular.” Though he hadn’t been expecting an answer, he got one anyway. The girl who answered him had a voice as pure as a bell’s peal, but it was utterly devoid of emotion.

Hajime looked up and saw a silver-haired, blue-eyed girl gazing down at him. She was floating above what had been the tower’s summit. Her appearance matched the description Liliana had given of the nun who’d kidnapped Aiko.

She wasn’t wearing a nun’s habit, though. Instead, there was a helmet on her head, gauntlets on her arms, and greaves over her legs. Over her torso, she wore nothing but a white sleeveless dress.

There were, however, metal plates covering both sides of her waist. Though it was a bit odd, it was clearly a combat uniform. She resembled one of the Valkyries from Norse mythology.

She soared into the sky, as if gravity had no hold over her. With the moon framing her silhouette, she turned to face Hajime, a pair of glimmering silver wings unfurling from her back.

The way they shimmered made it look like they were made entirely of mana.

Her glorious silver hair fluttered in the breeze. There was a mysterious, otherworldly beauty to her. Unfortunately, her eyes ruined her good looks.

While everything else about her shone like the moon, her eyes were as cold as ice. There was not even a trace of hatred in them. Only a mechanical, emotionless frigidity. It was as if she was just a doll.

The girl met Hajime’s sharp gaze and spread her arms wide. Her gauntlets shimmered, and a pair of large, hiltless swords appeared in her hands.

The two-meter longswords glimmered with the same silvery light as the rest of her. She swung them as if they were weightless, and addressed Hajime in an emotionless voice.

“I am Noint. An Apostle of God. My duty is to remove unwanted game pieces from my lord’s game board.”

A clear declaration of war.

The girl standing before Hajime was a true Apostle of God, sent directly by Ehit himself. *So those so-called gods finally decided to get in my way?* He’d ruined too much of their fun, so now they were going to eliminate him.

The air began to tremble as Noint gathered her silver mana.

Eventually, a wave of pressure crashed down on Hajime and Aiko like a waterfall. Aiko grit her teeth and tried to withstand it, but she was as white as a sheet. The pressure was too much for her. However, just before she fell unconscious, she was surrounded in a veil of crimson mana. Hajime’s aura of mana blocked the wave of pressure

Noint exuded.

Aiko's eyes snapped open and she looked up at Hajime. Despite the overwhelming pressure, he didn't seem the least bit cowed. On the contrary, there was a murderous glint in his eyes, and a fearless grin on his face.

Aiko was captivated by how confident he looked. Hajime stared Noint down and boldly declared his thoughts.

"I'd like to see you try, God's Puppet!" Eight thousand meters in the air, far above the skies of the Divine Mountain, God's Apostle and the monster who crawled out of the abyss clashed.

A short while before Hajime and Noint's battle began, Yue, Shea, Kaori, and Liliana snuck into the palace. Liliana was leading them to where Kouki and the others were.

Yue and the others' primary goal in the capital was to find the labyrinth hidden within the Divine Mountain and clear it, so normally they would never have bothered helping Liliana meet up with Kouki and assist in solving the kingdom's problems. In order to ensure Aiko's safety, though, they needed to make certain Kouki and the others weren't brainwashed. After all, they were the ones who'd be looking after her once Hajime got her out. Furthermore, the Divine Mountain was the Holy Church's base of operations. It was where their main temple was located. In order to infiltrate it unnoticed, Hajime would need to get Aiko alone. While they could take on the Holy Church, Hajime and his comrades didn't want to start an open war with them just yet.

As there was nothing else for them to do in the capital, Kaori and the others decided to join Liliana as she snuck into the palace.

Only Tio had remained outside. She was waiting on standby, in case anything happened. Yue had thought it best that at least one person stay somewhere they could have a full grasp of the situation.

The secret passage that Liliana led the girls through brought them out in an unused guest room. As the last person in line stepped out of the passage, an antique wooden drawer slid over the passage's entrance, hiding it from view.

"Everyone will probably be asleep. Let's start by going to Shizuku's room," Liliana whispered quietly to the girls behind her. Her decision spoke volumes about who she trusted the most out of the students. It wasn't Kouki, who was ostensibly everyone's hero and leader.

The girls nodded, and they filed out of the room. Shea, who had the best hearing of the group, took the lead this time.

Shizuku and the other students' sleeping quarters were in another wing of the palace, so they had to jog through a number of hallways

to get there.

When they were almost there, there was a massive boom that shook the entire castle. A second later, the sound of shattering glass rang out through the capital. All of the windows in the hallway the girls were standing in blew out, littering the ground with glittering shards.

“Wawawah, what just happened!?”

“Don’t tell me...”

Shea crouched down and nursed her bunny ears. They’d been perked up, listening for even the slightest of sounds, so the deafening boom had hurt pretty bad.

Behind her, Liliana paled and dashed over to a shattered window. Yue and Kaori followed behind her.

What Liliana saw confirmed her fears.

“Impossible... The barrier’s been... destroyed?” She brought a hand to her mouth and gasped.

The night sky was speckled with a million dots of light. However, most of those weren’t stars, but the remnants of the now-destroyed barrier that covered the capital. There was a brilliant flash of light, and another thunderous roar. A second barrier flared into existence and bore the brunt of the blow. Still, cracks spread across its surface.

“E-Even the second layer can’t... How did our defenses grow so weak!? At this rate...” The great barrier that protected the capital was actually three separate layers of defenses. Those barriers were created by an artifact held by the palace. Magicians worked day and night to pour mana into it, ensuring that it never waned.

For centuries, it had stood firm, protecting the capital from invasion. Never before had it been breached. It was one of the main reasons humans had been able to fight evenly against demons.

And yet it had been destroyed in an instant.

Not only that, the second layer was nearly gone too. Each successive layer was smaller, but also more powerful. Despite that, it looked like the second layer would be destroyed in a few more seconds.

The palace burst into an uproar. Hallway lamps were lit and people ran to and fro.

“Did someone betray us? But if that was the case, they’d only bring a small force... Isn’t that an entire army at our doorstep? What is going on?” While Liliana was muttering to herself, Tio contacted the others.

“Can you hear me? It’s Tio. Would you like an explanation of what’s happening?” Yue, Shea, and Kaori’s telepathy stones began to glow. Tio’s voice rang out through them. It seemed she’d already grasped the situation outside.

“Yeah. Thanks, Tio.”

“Understood. A massive army of monsters has appeared one kilometer south of the capital. The white dragon we fought at the Grand Gruen Volcano is there too. It was that dragon’s breath that demolished the barrier. However, I do not see the demon who controlled it anywhere.”

“So we’re really under attack? How did a monster army get here without anyone noticing? What were the scouts at the Reisen Gorge doing!?” Liliana screamed hysterically.

Yue and the others could more or less guess how they’d made it past unnoticed. That demon, Freid Bagwa, had cleared the Grand Gruen Volcano and therefore could use spatial magic.

Opening a portal large enough to transport an entire army was difficult, but not outside the realm of possibility. At her level of skill, Yue could even do it with some help.

Only teleportation would have allowed an army of this size to escape the notice of not just the scouts posted at the Reisen Gorge, but the villages and forts along the way to the capital. It was the only method that made sense.

Seeing as Freid wasn’t riding his white dragon, Yue guessed he must have exhausted himself opening the gate and was currently resting.

A second later, there was another sound of shattering glass. The second layer had been pierced.

Liliana urged Yue and the others to keep going. They needed to meet up with Shizuku as soon as possible. However, Yue shook her head.

“We’ll part ways here. You go on ahead.”

“B-But why?”

We need to meet up with the others and set up a final line of defense as soon as possible!

Yue glared out of the window and spoke clearly.

“That demon hurt Hajime. I’m going to make him regret being born.” She still held a grudge about that surprise attack. The others took an involuntary step back. Yue rarely displayed her emotions, but right now her voice was burning with rage.

“Y-You’re really mad, aren’t you Yue-san...?”

“Aren’t you, Shea? Or did you already forget what he did?”

“Never. I won’t let him die even if he begs for it.” Shea’s expression grew serious, and the warmth went out of her voice. When it came down to it, she was just as pissed.

It was rare to see Shea, who was always so cheerful, say something so violent. She, too, held quite the grudge.

“Which is why, Kaori-san, Lily-san, we’ll be going to teach that

oversized lizard and its master a lesson.”

“Yeah. We’ll take out his army while we’re at it.”

Before Kaori or Liliana could say anything, Shea and Yue leaped out of the window.

Poor Freid’s fate was sealed. There was no way he would be able to hold his own against Shea and Yue in an even fight. While the overpowered bunny and her broken vampire companion spelled doom for their enemies, they inadvertently also served as the capital’s saviors.

At the very least, they would buy time for the humans to regroup, which was why Liliana hadn’t tried harder to get them to stay. A chill breeze wafted through the shattered window, carrying with it the panicked screams of an entire city.

Liliana and Kaori stood there for a few seconds. After a while, they exchanged glances and resumed jogging toward Shizuku’s room.

“They really love Nagumo-san, don’t they?”

“Yep. When they get like that... Well, they’re terrifying. I wouldn’t want to be their enemy.”

“Kaori... do your best to not die. I’m rooting for you.”

“I will. Thanks, Lily...”

Though they were ostensibly helping the humans in this fight, Liliana was sure neither Shea nor Yue actually cared about what happened to the capital. Their sole reason for fighting was Hajime. Inwardly, Liliana despaired a little.

“Even though I’m the princess... everyone’s just forgetting about me...”

Would Lily cry if I told her I kind of wanted to go with them too?

Kaori thought absently to herself as she ran.

The capital was in chaos. People all over the city had come out into the streets to watch the barriers keeping them safe shatter one after another. The city guard was frantically running around, trying to get people back into their homes.

Some people had already packed their belongings and were trying to flee the city. Yet others had fled to the palace and were banging on its gates, begging to be let in.

Barely a few minutes had passed so people were still getting up, but there was no doubt that soon there would be riots in the streets.

The palace didn’t have the manpower to quell them right now, either. Especially since the uproar in the palace was even bigger than the one in the streets.

That was only natural, though. The kingdom’s top brass had awoken to find out that the demons already had a dagger pressed to the city’s throat.

They did their best to organize a counterattack, but— *Smaaaaaash!* They didn't make it in time.

The final barrier shattered, and the demon army, bolstered with a horde of monsters made from ancient magic, swarmed toward the capital.

The only protection the city had left were its stone walls. They were sturdily built, but everyone knew they wouldn't last a second against an army that had taken out their barriers.

A wave of demons cast their strongest spells at the city walls. Gouts of fire, bolts of lightning, pillars of ice, and clods of earth all slammed into the ramparts. A massive monster the size of a cyclops smashed its mace into what remained.

At another section of the wall, a massive boar over five meters long rammed into it over and over. Each impact shook the entire length of the wall.

Up above, a flock of Ash Dragons and black, eagle-like creatures soared over the wall and began attacking the capital proper.

The soldiers on the wall tried to stem the tide of flying monsters, but there just weren't enough of them. Moreover, they'd been taken entirely by surprise. It was like trying to stop a tornado with a fan.

Tio stood atop a tall clock tower that was in the center of the city and surveyed the battle. A few seconds later, Shea and Yue alighted next to her.

"Tio, did you see that disgusting demon anywhere?"

"Tio-san, where's that bastard hiding?"

"You two... I understand how you feel, but Princess Liliana seemed quite happy when you offered to go with her... Are you sure you should have abandoned her so casually like that?"

"Who cares about that."

"There's no time to waste now."

Yue and Shea didn't feel the tiniest bit of remorse. *I suspect this is Master's influence.* When it came to people they didn't care about, the two of them could be quite blunt.

Yue and Shea started scanning the army of monsters, looking for Freid Bagwa. Just then, they received a telepathic transmission from Hajime.

"Hey, Tio! Get over here!"

"Whoa!? Master? What's wrong?" Tio was surprised by the urgency in Hajime's voice.

"I've got a really dangerous enemy to deal with here. I need you to take Sensei for me. I can't fight at full strength while protecting her."

"Understood! I will head over immediately!"

If Hajime was up against someone that required him to go all out,

Tio knew there was no time to waste. She instantly transformed into her dragon form and shot up toward the Divine Mountain.

“Hajime, be careful.”

“Hajime-san, don’t you worry! Yue-san and I will take care of that stupid demon for you!”

“O-Okay? Weren’t you two with the princess— Holy shit! Crap, I can’t really talk right now! I don’t know what you two are up to, but don’t die, alright?”

Hajime was curious as to what Shea and Yue were planning, but he was a bit preoccupied at the moment. He cut the transmission and focused on his own fight.

Yue and Shea hesitated. If Hajime was having a hard time fighting, then maybe the optimal choice was to run to his aid instead of staying down in the city. Even if he wasn’t fighting at full strength because he had to protect Aiko, few enemies could match him.

“Yue-san, what do you want to do?”

“Hajime’ll be fine. He has Tio with him. Let’s get that demon. If we don’t kill him, he might destroy some of the other labyrinths’ magic circles.”

Indeed, that was the other reason Yue had decided to prioritize killing Freid. She wanted revenge of course, but she also knew she couldn’t let any other user of ancient magic run free.

It was possible that he already knew the location of the labyrinth inside the Divine Mountain. In which case, if he cleared it first it was possible he’d destroy the magic circle afterward like he did in Gruen.

From what they’d learned in the other labyrinths, Yue knew that, given time, each labyrinth would restore itself to its former state. Even the monsters in it would automatically return. However, there was no telling how long that might take.

That was why she didn’t want to give Freid a chance to destroy the Divine Mountain’s magic circle. And the best way to make sure he couldn’t do anything would be to kill him.

Though her main driving force was still revenge. Keeping the labyrinth safe was maybe 10% of the reason she was here. Two of the black eagles spotted Yue and Shea, and swooped over to them. They were around three to four meters long, and made for quite a fearsome sight.

Shea pulled out Drucken from her Treasure Trove and calmly fired an explosive slug at one of them.

Yue snapped her fingers, and a barrage of wind blades rained down on the other.

The two eagles were turned into mincemeat. One had its head blown off from the bullet’s explosion, while the other was chopped to pieces. Their broken corpses fell to the roofs of the houses below.

Chances were the people living in them were awake now, if they hadn't been already.

The other flying monsters took notice of the pair and began circling them. A good third of them had demon riders on them.

They kept their distance, wary of the power that had brought two eagles low in the span of a few seconds. However, when they realized they were facing a little girl and a rabbitman, they scoffed. Throwing caution to the wind, they began chanting spells.

Naturally, they didn't think Yue or Shea could fly. Regardless of what tricks they had up their sleeve, the demons doubted the two girls would be able to withstand a concerted barrage from above.

In all honesty, Yue and Shea had no interest in defending the capital. Their only target was Freid Bagwa. However, that didn't mean they would ignore enemies that attacked them.

Just in case, Shea tried to negotiate.

"We're not your enemy~ We only fought back because those things attacked us first~" Of course, the demons simply thought they were being made fun of, so that didn't stop their chanting.

Thinking these two girls weren't even worth their time, a number of the demons flew off to look for other prey. A second later, they heard a loud roar and a series of screams.

"Wh-What is that!?" The demons turned around to see a dragon made of lightning devouring their comrades and their mounts one by one. They could hardly believe their eyes.

"H-Help—" One of the demons managed to escape the slaughter and flew for dear life toward his comrades, but before he could reach them, something blew him to pieces.

Shea's explosive slug had made mincemeat out of him.

The demons who'd gone on ahead gazed on in horror as chunks of demon and Ash Dragon flesh rained down on them.

The demons stiffened and quickly prepared to guard against the next attack. They cast their gaze about, looking for the two girls who'd obliterated their comrades.

They were so terrified that they forgot to even blink the sweat out of their eyes. Still, they spotted Yue and Shea relatively quickly. However, the two girls weren't chasing after the demons. In fact, Yue and Shea were completely ignoring them. Like before, they scanned the horizon, looking for something.

Their demeanor made it clear to the demons that they weren't even worth these girls' time.

Their nervousness turned into anger. These girls had slaughtered the demons' friends, and they'd done so with the same casual indifference that one would swat an insect. They had walked all over the demons' pride.

Blood boiling, they charged at the two girls.

“You fucking biiiiiitch!”

“Uwoooooooooooh!”

“Dieeeeeeeee!”

Despite their rage, they maintained formation. It showed just how well-trained these demons were. They simultaneously unleashed magical attacks from all four directions. Demons were far more skilled at magic than humans were. Normally, a barrage like that would be a death sentence for anyone. However, Yue just sighed. Then, she waved her finger like a conductor’s baton.

“You should be able to tell the difference in our skill.” Yue’s thunder dragon coiled about her, protecting the two of them from the demons’ magic.

It then opened its maw wide, and the demons nearby practically flung themselves into it. At least, that was how it looked.

The demons on the other side tried to cast a barrage of piercing spells, but before they could a section of the dragon opened up and Shea shot out of it, charging straight at them.

“Tch! Flame Bullet!” One of the demons cut his chanting short and instantly cast a beginner-level spell to try and hold Shea back. Countless tiny balls of flame hurtled toward the bunny girl.

Shea fired Drucken and used its knockback to adjust her trajectory, easily avoiding the barrage of fire. She then swung Drucken in a wide arc, aiming for three demons who were in the middle of chanting.

“Take thiiiiiiiiiiiis!” Shea freely manipulated the hammer’s weight, making it weigh over four tons at the moment of impact. Thanks to her improved body strengthening abilities, she could still swing it easily despite the weight.

The demons never stood a chance. They were ground to a pulp, and the spines of the monsters they were riding on shattered. Monster and rider alike barely had time to scream before they died.

Shea then lowered her and Drucken’s combined weight to under five kilograms and used the recoil from its shotgun blast to shoot up into the air.

At the same time, she switched Drucken into barrage mode and fired an explosive slug at the remaining demon who’d shot the fireballs at her.

“Get blown to the other side of next week!” The force of the bullet sent the poor demon blasting off to the moon.

Shea poured mana into her Aerodynamic enchanted boots and created a light blue mana platform for her to stand on.

She tapped Drucken against her shoulder and surveyed her surroundings. This cute bunny girl had quickly become the demons’

worst nightmare.

A short way away, Yue faced the final remaining demon. He charged in a glorious but futile suicide attack.

“You damn braaaaaaaaat! This is for my friends!” Even if it meant his death, he wanted to get at least one hit on this girl.

Yue stared coldly at him.

“You’re three hundred years too young to call me a brat.” The demon had aimed for the moment Yue’s dragon had devoured another one of his comrades. He was confident it wouldn’t be able to turn in time. He sneered, certain he’d be able to stab her in time. When he was mere meters away, however, a blade of wind chopped his head off, and he plummeted to the ground.

Lamenting the waste of time, Yue returned to searching for Freid.

Shea alighted next to her, Drucken still resting on her shoulder.

“They totally thought we were fighting for the kingdom, didn’t they?”

“Yeah. Well, whatever. If that’s what they want to think, then just let them.”

“You really don’t care about them, do you? Well, I guess I don’t either.”

Despite their best efforts, they were unable to locate Freid Bagwa among the horde.

Yue began to worry that he’d located the entrance of the labyrinth and teleported there already, but just then—

“Ah!? Yue-san!”

“Mmm...” The moment Shea called out, Yue leaped off the clock tower.

A second later, an egg-shaped portal opened up, unleashing a barrage of aurora-colored light.

The light enveloped the clock tower, obliterating it. And it didn’t stop there, either. Eventually, it swallowed up all of the houses and buildings in its path.

“As I suspected, you do have some form of clairvoyance. How troublesome...” They turned around to see the foe they’d been searching for, Freid Bagwa. He was riding his white dragon.

He looked rather irritated that the two of them had managed to dodge his surprise attack so easily.



As Freid fully emerged from the portal, a hundred Ash Dragons and their demonic riders surrounded Yue and Shea.

There was a thunderous crash, and part of the city's outer wall crumbled away. Demons and monsters swarmed into the city. A number of squads broke away and started running toward Freid.

It looked like Freid wanted to make sure he finished the girls off for good.

"To think you actually survived. That man's tenacity is something I should not have underestimated... He's dangerous. In order to defeat him though, I shall have to make sure his comrades, you girls, die first." Yue and Shea grinned fearlessly at him. They spoke the same words that Hajime had said a few seconds ago, eight thousand meters above them.

"I'd like to see you try."

"Just try and kill me!"

The army of monsters and demons all attacked at once. Flaming javelins hot enough to scorch the very air, jets of water powerful enough to cut through steel, blades of wind sharper than swords, blocks of ice larger than boulders, dark gray spheres filled to the brim with petrification magic, and bolts of crackling thunder all hurtled toward the two girls.

Finally, a massive aurora trailed behind all the other spells.

There were forty demons, and more than a hundred monsters. Their attacks flew in from every conceivable direction.

The spells melded together into a storm of deadly magic. Still, neither Shea nor Yue seemed the least bit worried. In fact, they didn't even try to dodge. Most of the demons assumed they'd just given up. Freid, however, had an ominous premonition. He hurriedly pulled his dragon up and away.

"Cosmic Rift!" Yue cast her spell.

Two shimmering portals appeared in front of the aurora. Freid narrowed his eyebrows. Since the two portals were right next to each other, even if the light went into one, it'd just come out of the other and hit the girls anyway.

Freid's mistake had been assuming that Yue had summoned only a single pair of portals. This was because summoning a single pair at once was the most he could do.

Because Freid was distracted by the two portals in front of the girls, he noticed only too late that there was yet another portal behind him.

"Blast— Everyone, run!" Yue and Shea disappeared inside the first gate, while the second swallowed up the aurora and spat it out behind the demons. Freid shouted out a warning, but there was no time for

them to escape.

Freid was able to fly out of the way in time, but most of his army was decimated by the deadly aurora.

“How dare you make me kill my men. I underestimated you... I should have predicted that you would be able to open multiple gates at once.” Through his anger, Freid felt a burgeoning seed of fear. Yue was capable of far more impressive feats of magic than he was, even with the same spells.

He was curious as to how Yue was capable of casting spells without any incantations or magic circles, but his priority was to find out where his opponents had disappeared to.

“Freid-sama! Over there!” One of his men pointed at the outer wall. Yue and Shea were standing atop it. They hadn’t wanted to fight in the city because there was a possibility innocent citizens would get caught up in the battle. Furthermore, they knew he wouldn’t call off the entire invasion to chase them down. This was a challenge. If he wanted them, he’d have to fight them without his whole army.

On the other hand, if he left them alone he’d be leaving his rear vulnerable to attack.

Freid knew he couldn’t just ignore them. He homed in on them with his Farsight and saw Yue and Shea hold out their hands and curl their fingers back, as if to say “bring it on.”

The demons were livid. Not only were they being belittled by a bunny girl and a girl shorter than a kid, it was clear they were confident the demons wouldn’t even pose a threat to them. Though they were few in number, demons were confident that they were the strongest creatures in the land. They took pride in that, and seeing that pride trampled over enraged them.

“You little bitch!”

“You’re just a filthy little beast! Don’t get so full of yourself!”

The demons spat out curses and charged. Still, they didn’t rush forward blindly. They were wary of Yue’s powerful magic, and sent the monsters first as shields. Many of the monsters and demons on the ground fired off attacks at Yue as well.

Shea had an unbelievable amount of explosive slugs stored inside her Treasure Trove, so she knew she didn’t need to hold anything in reserve. She fired off bullets one after another into the hordes of enemies.

Pale blue shockwaves of mana exploded all across the battlefield, bringing death to anything they touched.

All that remained in their wake were crushed corpses.

In order to stop Shea’s mad rampage, Freid’s white dragon and the Ash Dragons all fired their breath at her.

Even Shea, with her body strengthening, wouldn’t come out of

such a concentrated attack alive. However, she wasn't the least bit worried.

"Spatial Severance." Yue summoned a black sphere in front of Shea.

The super-dense black hole bent the trajectories of the dragons' breath, and absorbed them all.

"Ngh, you used that before too. That must be ancient magic which I have yet to acquire. Listen up, men! I'll take that blond mage! The rest of you must strike down that rabbit girl! Keep them split up and don't let them coordinate attacks!"

"Yes, sir!"

Freid determined that it would be easier to take them on if he separated the two of them. Shea tried to rush back to Yue, but one of the demons wrapped his black eagle in a tornado and shot straight at her.

She tried to swat him out of the way, but a number of other demons attempted the same thing, making it difficult. And so, she instead used Drucken's recoil to leap out of the way and swung her hammer in a wide arc, blowing them all away.

Another wave of demons shot at her, and this time she knew she wouldn't have time to dodge, or counter, so she held Drucken aloft and took a defensive stance.

She pressed one of her hammer's many triggers, and a round shield popped out of the end with a metallic clunk.

"I'll kill you even if it costs me my life!" The blond-haired demon who rushed at her spat that out with such vehemence that Shea doubted it was just rage at his dead comrades that fueled him.

Shea was steadily pushed back, further and further away from Yue. She toyed with the idea of increasing her weight and temporarily retreating to the ground. Before she could though, a portal opened up behind her.

She glanced over and saw Freid ordering wave after wave of demons and monsters to keep Yue occupied while he cast another teleportation spell.

"Yue-san! I'm sorry, but I can't get back to you!"

"Yeah. That's fine. I'll kill this guy for you."

Just before she was pushed through the gate, Shea saw Yue give her a thumbs up. Shea smiled back at her friend with any sense of worry she was feeling draining from her face.

The demon attacking her snarled. He hated being ignored, especially when he was right in front of her. Shea let herself be pushed back by the enemy, and fell through the portal.

"That grinning face of yours makes me sick. I'm gonna rip your limbs off and drag your corpse in front of your friends." That was the

first thing Shea heard as she stepped into the air on the other side of the portal. It appeared as though this demon in particular held a grudge against Shea. She tilted her head as she looked at him.

“Have we met somewhere before? I don’t recognize you.”

“Do you remember the red-haired demon woman you killed?”

Shea didn’t understand why he was suddenly bringing up a woman.

The man ground his teeth, thinking Shea didn’t remember her at all. He screamed at Shea, his voice dripping with venom.

“The one you killed in the Great Orcus Labyrinth!”

“Oh! You mean her!”

“You biiiiiitch!” Seeing that Shea had totally forgotten about her until now, the man roared and sent a barrage of wind blades at her.

Shea dodged them all without even looking.

“Hey, what was so important about her, anyway? I don’t get why you’re so mad.”

“Her name was Cattleya... and she was my fiancée!”

“Ah! I see now... Well, that explains it.” Shea nodded in understanding. It seemed this man was Mikhail, the guy who the demon they’d killed had talked about.

Shea didn’t know how he’d found out Hajime was the one who’d killed her, but it looked like he had come for revenge. That was why he wanted to kill Yue and Shea, and then drag their corpses in front of Hajime.

“What gave you the right to kill Cattleya!? She was kind, and wise, and loyal!” Shea dropped the playful act and gave Mikhail a look that chilled him to the bone.

“Why should I care?”

“Y-You!”

“If she didn’t want to die, she shouldn’t have fought us in the first place. I mean, she was the one who attacked us. Hajime-san even warned her. He gave her a chance to run. I can understand why you’d want revenge for your dead lover, but there’s no point in telling me about her. It’s not like it has anything to do with me. If you’d killed someone I cared about, would you want to hear about what kind of person they were? No, right?”

“Sh-Shut up! I’ll make you pay for what you did to Cattleya! You won’t die an easy death!” Mikhail created another tornado and sent it flying at Shea.

Seeing as it didn’t need to surround the eagle, Shea guessed that it was his own magic that did that and not the black eagle’s. With another chant, Mikhail summoned numerous blades of wind to cut off Shea’s path of retreat.

Shea blew the wind blades away with a swing from Drucken, then made herself lighter and jumped out of the eagle’s path.

However, in the time that they'd been talking, many other demons had appeared through the portal as well. Shea was now outnumbered. Judging from the fact that they were all riding black eagles, she guessed that these demons were Mikhail's personal squad.

The demons simultaneously fired a barrage of stone needles at Shea. They fell upon her like a hailstorm. However, she simply diverted them all with an explosive slug from Drucken. Then, she jumped into the opening she'd created and closed in on one of the eagle-riding demons.

Without mercy, she slammed Drucken into him. His bones and organs were crushed instantly, and he was sent flying off into the darkness. Shea then extended Drucken's handle and pulverized another demon-eagle pair a little further away.

"Grr, don't let her get close! We control the skies! Keep your distance and bury her in a barrage of magic and stone needles!" Mikhail instantly grasped the scope of Shea's close-combat strength and ordered his men to stay back. The demons surrounded Shea and once again rained spells on her, but she lithely dodged every attack, dancing through the sky with the help of her Aerodynamic-enchanted boots.

Every time she tried to close in on an enemy though, they instantly flew back, maintaining their distance. Shea was starting to get annoyed by their hit and run tactics.

"Sheesh. Quit darting around like that! Fine, I'll just have to beat you all to a pulp!" Her bunny ears standing on end, Shea pulled something out of her Treasure Trove.

It was a red sphere, made entirely of metal. And it was a good two meters in diameter. There were chains hanging off one section of the sphere. Shea attached the top of Drucken to those chains.

Gravity took its hold on the sphere, and it began falling to the ground. Shea kicked it back into the air and hit it as hard as she could with her hammer.

There was a loud metallic clang, and the ball was sent flying at an insane speed.

The demon it was headed toward tried to dodge out of the way, but the sphere fired a shockwave out of its side and adjusted its trajectory. Unable to escape, the eagle and its demon rider were crushed by a ten-ton ball. Their shattered remains fell to the earth below.

With another swing from Drucken, the sphere reversed directions and headed back to Shea's side.

In the time it took to return, Shea kept the demons busy with her explosive slugs. Those that couldn't defend in time were killed. Once the sphere returned to her, Shea sent it hurtling off to a new target.

This was the newest addition to Drucken that Hajime had fashioned. It was basically a massive kendama. Shea could freely control its weight and its direction by using her magic and the recoil from the explosives Hajime had packed inside it.

“Oraoraoraoraoraora!” Shea sent her massive kendama whizzing across the battlefield. It went out, killed someone, returned to her, then went out again. The dazzling red meteor lit up the skies of the capital, spelling death for anyone in its vicinity. Before long, it was drenched in the blood of demons.

“Curse you and your strange techniques! Everyone, retreat! Attack her from the very edge of your range!” Mikhail bit his lip and barked out orders. He circled Shea, firing off restraining spells one after another in order to slow her down.

However, Shea leaped higher into the air, dodging every one of them. It was as if gravity had no hold over her... But then another torrent of spells came down from above.

“Hmph. Pathetic!” Shea raised Drucken over her head and twirled it rapidly. The kendama attached to it began to spin as well.

The rotating ball became her shield, deflecting the barrage of powerful spells that had been fired at her.

“I have you now!” Thinking she had her hands full defending against his subordinates, Mikhail rushed at Shea.

His eagle launched a deadly barrage of stone needles, which Mikhail accelerated with the wind spell Gale Sovereign. The storm of needles rushed toward Shea.

Shea increased her weight tremendously and allowed gravity to pull her to safety.

Mikhail smirked. This was still within his expectations. He began chanting another spell, planning on burying Shea in a storm of wind blades. And that was exactly when things stopped going as planned. Shea pulled a fist-size metal ball seemingly out of thin air and let it fall.

“Here goes!” She kicked it with all her strength toward Mikhail.

Before he could finish his spell, the ball slammed into his eagle with a meaty thunk.

“Caaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaw!”

“You little...” The black eagle hurtled toward the ground, with Mikhail still on it. In one last act of desperation, he fired another burst of wind-powered stone needles as he fell out of sight.

Shea just barely managed to deflect them with Drucken. Still, a few them punched through, piercing her arm and shoulder.

“He did it! He got her with the Cotriss’ needles!”

“It’s over now!”

The needles weren’t large enough to cause any serious damage,

but the demons all grinned as if they'd already won.

Shea cocked her head in confusion. A second later, she realized why they were so happy. The parts of her body that had been stabbed started to petrify. It appeared this Cotriss monster's special magic was to fire needles that petrified anything they touched. That was quite a troublesome ability.

Normally something as deadly as petrification could only be cured through light magic or strong healing items. And so, as Shea was fighting on her own, they thought she was definitely done for. There were no healers in sight, and even if she did have some medicine on hand, they definitely weren't going to give her enough time to drink it. Before long, she'd be fully petrified.

A second later, though, their triumphant grins turned into looks of dumbfounded despair; for Shea had proven herself beyond the realm of common sense.

"Grr, I let my guard down. Still, this isn't enough to stop me!" She pulled the needles out of her arm and closed her eyes. The petrification stopped spreading, and like the receding tide, began to shrink. Within seconds the petrification had vanished, and the holes in Shea's arm had closed up.

"Wh-What the!?"

"How did she do that!?"

She had neither downed any potions, nor had they seen her chant any spells. She'd just concentrated a little and the petrification, along with her wounds, had just vanished. The demons trembled in fear. Their voices shook. They were facing something they couldn't understand.

Of course, Shea hadn't actually done anything special. She'd just used restoration magic.

As with the other ancient magics, her aptitude for it was strikingly low. The most she could use it for was healing minor wounds and removing status effects. Unlike Yue's automatic restoration, she couldn't regenerate lost body parts, or instantly heal fatal wounds either. And she definitely couldn't return objects to their former state. Still, with a little concentration, she could heal minor wounds and fractures and recover from most slow-progressing status effects in a few seconds. Given enough time, she could heal more serious injuries as well.

The demons' despair was understandable.

The combination of her overwhelming strength and near-instant regeneration had left them bereft of options. There was no way for them to beat someone who could fly through the sky, heal on command, and possessed the firepower of a tank. Generals back on earth would have been terrified by her overwhelming strength.

The demons had the same look of terror in their eyes that Hajime's past opponents had when they'd seen his might.

This bunny girl's a monster!

"Now then, let's get back to it." Shea shouldered Drucken and launched herself at the stunned demons. Her fluffy bunny ears fluttered in the breeze.

Each swing of her hammer brought certain death to a demon.

The fear finally broke them. The demons charged at Shea, all thoughts of strategy and formation gone.

Shea calmly dealt with their rush, crushing them with her kendama or obliterating them with her explosive slugs.

As the last member of Mikhail's squad fell victim to Shea's hammer, a dark shadow covered the moon.

She looked up and saw dark clouds forming above her. Mikhail fell through them, heading straight for Shea. It seemed his eagle was too injured to do anything other than dive straight down.

"You may be good, but I bet even you can't dodge a thousand lightning bolts at once!" At his words, countless bolts of lightning poured down, with no discernible pattern or logic. Electricity filled the sky.

Normally, the skill Thunder Hammer fired a single massive bolt of lightning from the heavens. However, Mikhail had fractured the spell and spread its power over a much wider area. He truly was a master of magic.

The lightning bolts quickly overtook Mikhail.

It seemed his plan was to take Shea down with him while she was distracted by the barrage of lightning. Even if the spell's power had been diluted, and even if Shea was a godlike monstrosity, the thunder would at least halt her movements for a bit.

Moreover, the lightning was traveling at 100 mph. No one could follow it with their naked eye, much less dodge it.

Mikhail had grit his teeth and watched his comrades die one after another while he'd chanted this spell. No matter what, he would make sure it didn't end up being in vain.

What happened next, however, exceeded Mikhail's estimations once more.

Shea was actually dodging the lightning bolts. No, perhaps it was more accurate to say she was standing where she knew they wouldn't hit.

Mikhail had underestimated her. He hadn't realized Shea also possessed a skill that let her dodge things too fast to see.

In the past few weeks, Shea had unlocked another one of Future Sight's derivative skills: Prophetic Vision. It allowed her to see two seconds into the future whenever she wished. It wasn't nearly as

powerful as Branching Paths, but it also required far less mana to activate. Furthermore, she could activate it in quick succession. This was the result of her constant training.

“Just what in the hell are you!?”

“Just your average bunny girl.” Shea joked with Mikhail as she continued dodging the storm of lightning bolts. Naturally, Mikhail, too, passed right by her. As he did so, Shea rounded on him with her kendama.

He was too close for the ball itself to hit him, but the chains wrapped around him, trapping him in place.

“Nnnnnngh! Let me go!”

“As you wish~” Shea swung Drucken around, and sent Mikhail hurtling toward the ground. The centrifugal force built up with Shea’s swing was tremendous, and Mikhail slammed into the ground with the force of a meteor. The barrier of wind he put up at the last minute managed to keep him alive, but only just. Most of his bones were shattered, and he was coughing up blood.

Shea alighted on the ground near him. Then, she shouldered Drucken and walked up to the broken demon.

Mikhail looked at her with empty eyes. Just staying conscious was an ordeal by that point. The corners of his lips twitched up into a self-deprecating smile. Even he didn’t know if it was because he’d failed to get the revenge he so badly craved, or because he’d just watched his entire squad get wiped out by one girl. After what he’d seen though, all he could do was smile.

Eyes locked on Shea, Mikhail uttered his final words. In his mind, he apologized to Cattleya for not being able to avenge her.

“Gah... you... *cough*... monster!”

“Fufu, thanks for the compliment!” Sadly, his insult only served to make Shea happy.

Ah, if there really is an afterlife, I’ll need to look for Cattleya there. That was the last thought that flashed through his mind before Shea’s hammer ended his life.

Shea looked down at Mikhail’s battered corpse and smiled to herself.

“Looks like I’m finally strong enough to be called a monster too. Fufu, I’m finally getting closer to Hajime-san.”



“Now then, I should see how Yue-san is doing...” Shea looked over to where she sensed Yue’s mana. It looked like she’d been teleported quite far.

If I hurry, I might still be able to get a few good hits off on that fucking bastard. With that, Shea dashed off to rejoin Yue.

Ash Dragons filled the sky in such numbers that they blotted out the moon. There were easily more than a hundred of them. At their center was a massive white dragon with a gaping hole in its chest. Atop the dragon rode Freid Bagwa.

“I hope you don’t consider this cowardly. Dividing your enemy’s strength is one of the basics of strategy.” Freid watched as Shea and Mikhail disappeared through Freid’s Cosmic Rift. Then, he turned back to Yue as Mikhail’s eagle squad flew in after him.

Though she showed no signs of using wind magic, she continued floating in the sky. Freid had expected to see some kind of reaction from Yue after throwing her companion into a portal, but she just silently stared him down.

Like all demons, Freid considered himself superior to the other races. He was proud of his race, had an unwavering belief in his god, and was basically an inflexible guy all around. That was why he would never be charmed by someone of a different race.

Still, he thought it would be a waste to kill this girl, who shone as beautifully as the moon. That was the power of Yue’s looks.

Of course, he knew he needed to kill Yue in order to weaken Hajime, and he still hated her for killing so many of his comrades, but he couldn’t help but chat for a while longer.

“What a waste. Woman, no matter how skilled you may be, even if you can cast spells without chanting, so long as you are a magician you have no hope of victory. What do you say? Why not join my side instead? Someone of your abilities would be treated well here.” Yue didn’t bother even considering his proposal.

“Hmph. Never in a million years, you ugly wretch,” Yue sneered.

Though she’d called him ugly, Freid was more handsome than most men. His good looks, combined with his influential position, meant that demon women were all over him. By no standard could he be considered an ugly wretch.

However, Yue had seen the expression of pure rapture Freid had made when he’d spoken of his god. That blind devotion had disgusted her.

Of course, his expression now was normal, but that just made him all the more laughable to Yue. Even leaving all of that inside, Yue had no intention of being with any man other than Hajime.

Freid’s smile froze in place.

“So you would choose martyrdom over me? Or is your loyalty to this country that strong? I’ll tell you now, they’re not worthy of your loyalty. The people here are fools, deceived into blindly believing falsehoods. They are not worth sacrificing your life for. You would be better served learning the teachings of our god, the great Alv-sama. Once you open your eyes to the truth, you too will— Ah!?” Yue’s answered his religious prattling with a barrage of wind blades. She couldn’t bear to hear any more.

A fountain of blood appeared in the night sky. Yue’s blades had clipped Freid’s shoulder as he tried to dodge out of the way. The fact that he’d been able to react in time at all proved that he was skilled enough to conquer a labyrinth. Had his senses been less finely honed, he would have lost an arm just then.

Yue stared coldly at Freid, who glared angrily back. She held only contempt for this would-be demon conqueror.

“Save your pretty speeches. You hurt Hajime. For that, you will die.” Yue summoned forth a freezing blizzard.

It whipped around her in a tornado of snow and ice, hiding her from view. The white storm that connected heaven and earth lowered the surrounding temperature to near-freezing. The Ash Dragons closest to her were frozen in seconds.

She’d combined the intermediate-level wind spell Tempest Flash with one of the strongest ice spells, Frost Prison.

The frozen Ash Dragons fell to the earth, shattering into a thousand pieces as they hit the ground. It was as if Yue had brought about a localized ice age. The dragons had been frozen all the way through. Even as they shattered, their blood remained frozen.

“So you refuse to even consider it. Very well. Kill her!” Freid grit his teeth and ordered his men to attack. He’d just lost twenty Ash Dragons in one go. He didn’t want to lose any more. Aurora balls closed in on Yue from all directions, all at the same time.

A rainbow-colored meteor shower rained down on her. The aurora balls easily penetrated Yue’s icy tornado. In fact, they ripped the entire thing apart.

Freid expected to see Yue bloodied and beaten, but was instead met by the sight of her standing unhurt amidst a cluster of black spheres.

The moment he saw she was still alive he ordered his monsters to fire again. However, those deadly aurora spheres were continually sucked into Yue’s black holes, or had their trajectories completely redirected. Yue manipulated her gravity and soared higher into the sky.

Despite the deadly barrage she faced, she was unfazed. The countless Heavenfalls and Spatial Severances surrounding her looked

like miniature satellites protecting their star.

“If breath attacks won’t work, then we’ll just hit you directly! Charge!” The Ash Dragons obeyed immediately. Their talons were sharp enough to make mincemeat out of a tiny girl like Yue.

They came in waves, hoping to overpower her with numbers. Everywhere Yue looked, she was surrounded by gray. But even then, she wasn’t worried. Yue simply closed her eyes and began concentrating.

Thinking an unmoving target would make for an easy mark, the Ash Dragons closed in, their talons bared and their maws open wide.

Seconds before she was ripped to shreds, Yue’s eyelids snapped open.

She spoke the name a single spell.

“Void Shatter.” Space itself splintered. Everything looked like it was being seen through a cracked mirror. Thousands of lines streaked through the sky, and where those lines joined, the world blurred.



Any Ash Dragon caught along those lines was ripped apart. Blood rained from the sky as the dragons were shredded with a sickening ripping noise.

This was her new spatial spell, Void Shatter. It split space along lines she defined, mercilessly cutting anything caught along them.

Because it warped space itself, there was no defending against it. Thirty more Ash Dragons joined the list of casualties.

Freid shivered. Even he couldn't cast a spatial magic spell on that scale, especially not that quickly.

"Such skill. Could you also be someone chosen by god? Are you perhaps the champion of that false god, Ehit? I see now why you refused my proposal!" Freid nodded to himself, convinced of his own misunderstanding. Yue looked at him as if he were a particularly disgusting cockroach.

"Preposterous. I fight for Hajime and Hajime alone. Don't lump me together with the likes of you." Freid seemed more bothered by her insulting his god than he was by her insulting him. His expression grew dark.

It looked like Yue had angered him for real.

"Very well. Then there is nothing more to discuss. I shall slaughter you, and parade your corpse in front of your lover. I'm sure that will be sufficiently shocking enough to render him defenseless."

"You talk big, but can you actually do it, ugly?"

A vein pulsed in Freid's temple as Yue sneered at him again. Rising to Yue's challenge, he attempted to back his words with actions.

He barked an order to the same bird-shaped monster Yue had seen on his shoulder at the Grand Gruen Volcano. A second later, a chunk of the monsters who had invaded the capital rushed over to Yue. It seemed they were planning on attacking her from the ground.

While still maintaining her gravity spells, Yue also cast Draconic Thunder to deal with the monsters below.

Dark clouds formed above her, and a second later a shimmering golden dragon descended from the heavens. She fired the auroras stored inside her Spatial Severances at Freid and his dragons to hold them at bay while she focused on annihilating the enemies on the ground.

Her thunder dragon, which normally swallowed everything in its path, was blocked by a six-legged turtle monster... An Absod, it seemed. It was the same creature they had encountered when rescuing Kaori and the others.

In fact, the Absod was devouring Yue's dragon.

Absods' special magic was that they could absorb other spells and

store them in their shell. And this Absod was far bigger than the one they had fought in the Great Orcus Labyrinth. Yue guessed that Freid had refined its design.

Still, Yue's Draconic Thunder was nothing to sneeze at. Even as it was sucking in the dragon's thunder, it was being lifted off the ground. Its shell creaked from the strain of defending against the dragon's maw.

Even improved, it seemed incapable of dealing with composite magic made of multiple spells. Though it could absorb the lightning, it couldn't absorb the gravity magic as well.

Before the Absod's shell was crushed by the pressure, another showed up and began absorbing the dragon's gravity magic.

Draconic Thunder couldn't stand up to two powered-up Absods, and was dismantled before long.

The Absods then fired the absorbed magic back at Yue.

"How annoying." Two beams of light, one yellow the other black, headed straight for Yue.

Yue's gravity spheres had their hands full absorbing the Ash Dragons' auroras, so she adjusted her gravity to fall upward instead.

"I already know how to deal with that strange lightning spell of yours. So long as my Absods are here, your magic is useless." Freid grinned triumphantly.

Yue didn't bother responding. She looked down at the Absods for a few seconds, then closed her eyes again and began concentrating.

"Planning on twisting space again? I won't let you!" His white dragon and his Ash Dragons fired their most concentrated barrage yet. At the same time, monsters that looked like black panthers leaped up toward Yue.

Even if Yue could keep the auroras at bay, her movements were dulled when she was casting. Freid was confident the panthers would get her.

The panthers unleashed a storm of tentacles at Yue, weaving between her black spheres.

The tentacles inflicted countless wounds on Yue, leaving her a bloody mess. Despite how bad it looked though, none of the injuries were deep.

Even if they had been, Yue's ultimate defense lay not in her barriers or her gravity magic, but in her automatic regeneration.

When her comrades were with her, she used barriers to protect them and even dodged attacks because she didn't like getting her clothes ripped up. However, her original fighting style had been to ignore all damage and focus entirely on attacking.

Freid watched in satisfaction as his panthers flayed Yue. However, his jaw dropped open in surprise as those wounds vanished the next

second.

“Is that ancient magic as well? Just how many labyrinths have you conquered!?” It was true that they all had restoration magic, but in Yue’s case at least, that wasn’t what she was using. Freid knew his only hope now was to annihilate Yue before she had a chance to recover. He ordered his monsters to commit to an all-out attack. Then, he began chanting another spatial spell as well.

Unfortunately for him, Yue finished first. Her eyes flew open, and her beautiful voice rang out across the chaotic battlefield.

“Five Heavenly Dragons.” Another wave of dark clouds obscured the sky.

A raging tornado whipped up next to them.

Streams of water rushed together and froze into one solid mass.

Grey dust coalesced into a monstrous dragon.

Blue flames burning hotter than hell coiled around her.

Five enormous elemental dragons appeared in the night sky above the capital.

They were each comprised of a different element held together by gravity magic.

The air crackled in the wake of these five heavenly beasts, and all the Ash Dragons screeched in fear. They had instinctively realized that these divine creatures were far more powerful.

Freid’s creations were no longer interested in killing Yue. Their only thoughts now were of escape. They looked pleadingly up at their master.

“How...” Freid stared blankly at the dragons. This was so far beyond his understanding of magic that he couldn’t comprehend it.

“You hope to seal my magic? Know your place.” Yue glared haughtily down at Freid. She looked every bit the empress she’d once been as she pointed a single slender finger at the ground.

The heavenly dragons obeyed their sovereign’s will and descended upon her enemies.

The lightning dragon went straight for the Absod, eager for a rematch.

The Absod began absorbing it again, but this time Yue’s fire dragon was right behind it. While the Absod was busy with one dragon, the other melted its shell with its blistering heat.

“Kaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” The Absod screamed in pain. It was being liquified while still alive. Freed once more, the lightning dragon sped on to find other targets.

Namely the other Absod, who was trying to absorb Yue’s storm dragon. The thunder dragon swallowed the Absod whole, leaving only ash behind.

Meanwhile, the frost dragon had frozen another Absod solid,

while the earth dragon was petrifying everything it touched.

Once freed, the storm dragon rushed off to slice through all the other monsters Freid had summoned.

Strong as she was, Yue still had difficulty controlling five dragons at once. Sweat beaded on her forehead as she continued directing them.

Seeing an opportunity, Freid commanded his Ash Dragons to attack.

Yue recalled her five elemental dragons, and her primal forces of nature collided with Freid's devastating Ash Dragons.

The difference in strength was clear. Freid's poor dragons were slaughtered one after another by Yue's creations.

It was only now that Freid began to understand that he was up against a monster far beyond his abilities to handle. That boy he'd manged to take by surprise at the Grand Gruen Volcano wasn't the only person Freid needed to worry about. Hajime's companions were just as deadly.

He finally realized how arrogant he'd been when he'd asked Yue to join him as his subordinate.

The only way he'd even have a chance was to go all out.

"Shake the foundations of this world, which neither a dragon's roar, nor a giant's hammer, nor the marching of a thousand armies can hope to touch. Only the sighs of the gods may make the earth to scream out thus! Lament and despair your inevitable destruction—Void Fissure!" The space around Yue began to warp. It was followed by a low rumbling, which sounded like the screams of the planet itself.

Yue knew what kind of spell Freid had cast, and instantly switched to defense. Void Fissure's scope was too large for her to avoid. Normal magic held no chance of defending against it, either.

Yue dispelled her dragons and her gravity spheres, then instantly cast spatial magic of her own. She wouldn't be able to survive if her concentration was split between multiple spells.

She got her spatial barrier up just in time to catch the explosions caused by Freid's Void Fissure.

They weren't normal explosions. It was as if space itself had ruptured.

Freid's remaining Ash Dragons and the monsters on the ground were wiped out instantly, the ground underneath Yue was torn apart, and the clouds above her were shredded to bits.

Void Fissure was a spell that forcibly contracted then rapidly expanded space in a certain area. The resulting shockwaves caused explosions that were unblockable by normal means.

"Hmm... So this is the power of ancient magic." Though

everything else had been destroyed, Yue was still alive.

Her clothes were tattered and a dribble of blood spilled from her mouth, but she was relatively unscathed. Considering how destructive Freid's spell was, it was amazing she'd taken so little damage. And even the slight wounds he had managed to inflict healed instantly.

Yue should have been obliterated without a trace. The reason she hadn't was because just before Freid's spell hit, she had cast Illusion Cage.

Illusion Cage was a spatial spell that locked a section of space in place. It was a versatile spell that could be used both as a barrier, and as a means of capturing a target. However, its mana cost was insane.

Because of how rushed she had been, Yue hadn't been able to completely fix space around her. That was the only reason she'd taken any damage at all. Of course, that slight damage had been healed instantly thanks to her automatic regeneration. She also cast restoration magic on her clothes to make it look as though she'd never been hit at all.

Yue stood there amidst the destruction, basking in the moonlight. To Freid, she looked almost divine. This time, though, he hadn't underestimated her. Freid fired off another attack from her blind spot.

"I knew you'd survive that, you little monster!" Even as he'd cast Void Fissure, Freid had opened a Cosmic Rift behind Yue. He'd passed through it and had his white dragon fire an aurora attack.

Though Yue was able to dodge out of the way by falling to the right, the dragon bit into her arm as it passed by.

A massive spray of blood filled its mouth. Despite how soft Yue's skin was, the dragon didn't bite all the way through. It kept Yue's arm trapped in its mouth and fired another aurora from point-blank range.

Freid was exhausted from casting high-level spells in quick succession, but he was confident that this time he'd checkmated Yue.

When he saw Yue's expression though, Freid's confidence melted away, replaced by complete and utter despair.

She was smiling at him. It was faint, but her lips were definitely curled upward. Freid found himself unable to look away.

She no longer looked like a divine being. If anything, she looked more akin to a devil than a god. The moonlight, which had emphasized her solemnity before, now cast dark shadows over her face.

Her crimson eyes, framed by her golden-blond hair, glowed in the night.

You dare bare your fangs at me? Yue whispered the name of the spell she had prepared.

"Revival Reversal." The river of time can flow backward too.

Yue didn't say those words aloud, but Freid knew he was in

trouble.

Freid and his dragon felt it hit at the same time.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The dragon bit Yue’s arm off as it writhed in pain, but she didn’t seem to mind. Once her body was free, she flew upward using gravity magic.

Seconds later, her arm had grown back.

Yue looked down at Freid, who was by that point bleeding from multiple deep wounds.

“How does it feel? Those were the wounds Hajime gave you before. It hurts just as much, right?”

“Gaaah! You bitch, how did—” Freid grit his teeth against the pain and looked up at the girl who was smiling sweetly at him.

Both of them were covered in blood.

The hole in the white dragon’s chest looked raw and inflamed, as if the wound were fresh. It clawed at its injuries, struggling to stay in the air.

Freid’s left arm was now crushed, and there was a massive gash in his chest. He was also coughing up blood, too.

Both of them looked to be on the verge of death.

All of those injuries were ones Hajime and the others had inflicted on Freid during their fight in the Grand Gruen Volcano.

Revival Reversal was a restoration spell that restored the injuries a target had suffered in the past. It was a terrifying spell that could reopen scars that should have long-since healed.

Yue had wanted to defeat Freid with this spell from the very beginning.

This was her way of getting revenge. Back in the Grand Gruen Volcano, she’d been forced to retreat without being able to land a single blow on the man who had hurt her precious Hajime. She’d sworn to herself back then that the next time they saw Freid, she would beat him to a pulp.

Once they’d cleared the Sunken Ruins of Melusine and learned restoration magic, she’d discovered the perfect spell to do it with too. Getting Freid back by making him relive his defeat just seemed all too perfect.

There was one problem that had made using this spell difficult, though.

Revival Reversal required the caster to be within three meters of the target, and touching some part of their body. Moreover, it could only replicate as much damage as the caster used mana. Close combat was Yue’s Achilles’ heel. She honestly doubted she would have an opportunity to close in on Freid, especially as he was riding a mobile

dragon. Her plan had been to batter Freid down and get close once he was too weak to fight back. But before she could, he'd come to her of his own accord, which was why she'd smiled so happily when his dragon had bit her arm. He'd given her the perfect chance to get her revenge.

"It seems... I lack the ability to defeat you as I am. At this point, my only option is to—"

"You're not running away." Yue raised her hand, intending on delivering the final blow to Freid. However, before she could, a barrage of magic came at her from below.

"Freid-sama! Please retreat!"

"We'll buy time for your escape!"

The demons who'd invaded the capital had turned back to help their lord. When they'd seen him struggling, they'd called off the assault.

"You guys! Ngh, forgive me!" Furious at what Yue had done to their master, the demons attacked without any regard for their own lives.

Naturally, their pitiful barrage couldn't harm Yue. Still, they were able to buy just enough time for Freid to slip away through a Cosmic Rift.

He vanished just before Yue's flaming javelin hit him.

"Die." Yue looked coldly down at the demons who were shouting curses at her. With a wave of her hand, she cast Void Fissure, the same spell Freid had used on her. Twisting explosions rocked the ground.

She'd packed more mana into it than usual; it had irked her that these pests had interrupted her revenge.

"Tch... He's like a cockroach." Yue clicked her tongue.

Next time she would make sure to kill him.

Yue took a deep breath to calm herself. Just then, a cheerful voice rang out across the battlefield.

"Yue-saaaaaa! Is that bastard still alive? If so, let me get a few good hits on him too... Whoa, what happened here? Did you cause an earthquake or something?" Shea bounded up to Yue, leaping from one pale-blue mana platform to the next.

"He ran away..." Shea could guess more or less what had happened from those few words. His resilience surprised her. Shea smiled bitterly and comforted Yue.

The two of them exchanged information and replenished their mana. While they were describing their respective fights, they saw a flash of rainbow-colored light above the palace, followed by a red streak.

They watched as pillars of light descended to the ground,

shattering the city's walls and vaporizing tens of thousands of monsters in an instant.

Silence followed. The two of them looked at each other and said a single word in unison.

“Hajime.”

“Hajime-san.”

No one else could have caused that. They two girls were one in mind.

“Let's go to the palace for now.”

“Yeah...”

Yue and Shea looked down one last time at the wasteland that had once been the outskirts of the capital. With weary smiles, the two of them flew off toward the palace.

Chapter III: God's Apostle

Noint flapped her silver wings. It was not to gain altitude, but to shoot a torrent of magically-enhanced feathers at her enemy.

They cut through the air as they sped toward Hajime, who was floating eight thousand meters up in the air.

He raised his revolver, the legendary artifact he'd created that had ended the lives of countless powerful foes, and fired. Schlag let out a roar, and Hajime's bullet powered through Noint's feathers, shredding them. He had angled his single shot to cut through a swathe of the angel's projectiles. Then, he stepped into the hole he'd created, letting the rest of Noint's wall of feathers pass him by.

In order to truly avoid your opponent's attacks, you needed the courage to step forward.

"Hyaaaah!" A cute voice interrupted Hajime and Noint's deathmatch. It seemed starkly out of place on this battlefield, where two powerful enemies were putting their lives on the line.

The one who'd screamed so unceremoniously was, of course, Aiko.

For the first time in her life, she was experiencing a mid-air dogfight. Though Noint fired feathers at the same rate Hajime's Metzerei spat out bullets, he continued dodging each deluge by a hair's breadth.

"Sensei! Stop screaming! You'll just bite your tongue!"

"I can't just stop screaming on— Ah!? I-I bit my tongue..." Aiko ignored Hajime's warning and instantly found herself regretting it. Tears sprang to her eyes, and not just because she'd bitten her tongue.

Hajime knew Aiko, who wasn't particularly strong physically, wouldn't be able to handle movements that were too sudden, which was why he'd continued using Riftwalk and tried to dodge with as little movement as possible. Unfortunately, even that required moving faster than a rollercoaster, and Aiko was already dizzy.

That being said, there weren't any alternatives. He could hardly just dump her somewhere.

He couldn't ignore Noint's attacks for even a second, and even if he could have she'd have just targeted Aiko if he left her. As inconvenient as it was, fighting while holding Aiko was the only way to keep her safe.

Fortunately, he wouldn't have to keep this up for too much longer. A trustworthy ally was on her way.

Hajime shot down another wave of feathers with Schlag, then turned to Aiko. She was clinging to him for dear life, and had her eyes shut tight.

"Sensei, just hang on for a little longer. One of my comrades is coming here. She'll take you down to safety."

"O-Okay! B-But what about you, Nagumo-kun!?"

"I still need to kill this emotionless puppet!"

"Aww, I'm sorry I'm just a burden..." It frustrated Aiko that she was just dragging her student down. Hajime didn't have time to reply. Instead, he hugged Aiko tight and did a backflip in mid-air.

He watched as a blast of silver light passed just over him. It was the same mysterious skill that had disintegrated the tower Aiko had been confined to.

Aiko did her best not to scream as she was swung about wildly. As she was pressed up against Hajime's chest, she noticed just how steady his heartbeat was. The fact that he was calm even in this situation helped ease her worries a little too.

This isn't the time to be thinking about that! Aiko mentally berated herself and clung tighter to Hajime.

"Don't worry about it. I expected to run into trouble when I came here."

"Y-You didn't... have to go so far for me..."

Of course, Hajime had known he would need to fight the Holy Church eventually if he wanted to obtain all of the ancient magic, so it wasn't entirely for Aiko's sake. However, it seemed Aiko had misunderstood Hajime's intentions.

It probably didn't help that Hajime was practically hugging her as he fought. *I'm probably gonna have to resolve this misunderstanding soon.*

"I see you still aren't taking me seriously."

"Whoa!?" Hajime was startled to hear Noint's mechanical voice right next to him.

He instantly lifted his prosthetic arm and fired a shotgun blast out of his elbow. Using the recoil, he gained himself some distance as well. Noint raised one of her swords to block while she swept the other in a wide arc.

Her glimmering silver swords were two meters long and thirty centimeters wide. Not only did they look intimidating, they had a very sinister ability as well. Anything wrapped in Noint's mana was granted the effects of her special magic, Disintegrate. A single touch by them would inflict a fatal wound.

However, Hajime couldn't move too fast or he'd injure Aiko, so he was forced to use Schlag to redirect the blade while he fell backward.

Noint's sword passed inches above Hajime's face, cutting off the tips of his bangs.

The only reason Schlag wasn't disintegrated was because Hajime had hardened the azantium coating with Steel Skin. Even that wasn't enough to let his weapons or artificial arm stay in contact with Noint's swords for more than a few seconds, though.

As it was, blocking the blow had shaved a few centimeters off Schlag's coating. If he kept it up, his weapons would be destroyed before long.

Noint let the force of her slash swing her around, her glimmering silver hair fanning out around her like a halo. As she completed her turn, she swung down with her second sword, the one she had used to block earlier.

The speed of her second swing was so fast that Aiko couldn't even follow it with her eyes. She just saw a silver flash.

Hajime dodged to the side, using the recoil from a second shotgun blast. Once he was clear, he took aim with Schlag and fired three times.

Three streaks of red light headed straight for her. One went for her head, another her heart, and the last her stomach. However, Noint's reaction time was inhuman.

The moment Hajime fired, she held her sword up vertically, blocking all three bullets.

Hajime pulled back even further and sent out his Cross Bits for a follow-up attack. They fired powerful explosive slugs that created huge red shockwaves on detonation.

Noint dissipated the shockwaves with a beat of her wings, but that gave Hajime more time to flee.

"Awawawawa. I can't even tell what's..."

"Sensei, could you stop making those cute noises in the middle of a duel? It's kinda killing the mood."

"C-Cute!? Nagumo-kun, that's not something you can say to your teach—"

It was more serious than Hajime made it seem. Aiko's oddly cute screams were sapping his concentration. In a fight between two people of their caliber, even a millisecond's distraction could get you killed. Noint had been right when she'd said Hajime wasn't taking this seriously. Of course, Hajime wasn't at all flustered by having a cute woman such as Aiko hanging around his neck, but the noises were still distracting.

"To think you could defend so well against my attacks while guarding that dead weight... You are far too strong. Strong people such as you are unfit to be my lord's pawns."

"Thanks for the praise. Can't say I'd want to be the pawn of some shitty NEET who throws a tantrum every time things don't go his way, so I'm happy to hear I'm not wanted."

"There is no use in trying to taunt me. For I have no emotions."

"Hm? I'm not trying to taunt you, that's just what I really think."

"....." Noint silently spread her wings and crossed her swords in front of her.

Does she really not have any emotions? Looks like she's trying to shake off her anger and prove it's not bothering her to me... Hajime quickly discarded the thought. There was no point in worrying about it.

After all, he'd be killing her either way. Regardless of what she was thinking, regardless of what she felt, she would die by his hands.

Noint flapped her wings again and unleashed another barrage of feathers. This time though, they weren't aimed at Hajime. Instead, they gathered in front of Noint and arrayed themselves into an odd formation. As they overlapped over one another, Hajime realized she was making a magic circle out of the feathers. Noint glared coldly at Hajime through the shining silver magic circle. Once it was complete, she cast her spell.

"Hellfire Tsunami." Noint summoned a burning tsunami that scorched the very atmosphere.

So she can use elemental magic too. She simply hadn't cast her elemental spells before because she'd believed her feathers would be enough.

In other words, she hadn't been fighting seriously either.

Crimson hellfire bore down on them, and all Aiko could see was red. The tsunami was large enough to blot out the horizon.

Aiko looked up at Hajime, expecting him to have a solution. Sweat rolled down his cheek as he desperately looked around the tsunami, searching for the spell's core. So long as he could find it and shoot it, the flames would disperse.

Of course, that required an ungodly amount of precision, but Hajime was more than up to the task. He had trained his sharpshooting skills extensively.

However, Noint's spell was on a far larger scale than anything Hajime had faced before. Anyone on the Divine Mountain would have thought noon had come, since that was how bright and all-encompassing the flames were. It was like searching for a needle in a haystack.

Time ran out before Hajime could find it.

The massive tsunami swallowed Hajime and Aiko up. Anyone watching would have been convinced they had died.

The tsunami that spanned a couple hundred meters should have left not even their ashes behind, but Noint continued staring at the center of the tsunami.

"So you can withstand even this..." As she muttered that, the spell ended and the flames dispersed. At the center of the spell stood

Hajime and Aiko, surrounded by four of his Cross Bits. They were both unharmed.

The Cross Bits formed a pyramid around Hajime, their ends connected to each other by wires. Screens of crimson light filled the space between the wires.

“This is still a prototype, so I was a little worried... Thank god it worked.”

“Y-You...”

Hajime sighed in relief.

This was the latest of his weapon enhancements. He had used creation magic to enchant wires with spatial magic, then equipped his Cross Bits with said wires. He’d also covered the surface of his Cross Bits with spatial magic-enchanted ore. Unlike physical shields, barriers made by partitioning space were theoretically unbreakable.

However, these were still in the experimental phase. Until now, Hajime hadn’t tested them against a proper attack, so he’d had no idea how much they would be able to take.

Aiko looked blankly from the barrier that had saved her life to Noint. The apostle was already preparing her next attack.

This time she sent a few feathers at Hajime while she crafted over a hundred magic circles at once.

She was determined to bury him in an avalanche of magic.

Hajime guessed that his new barriers might be able to take it, but staying on the defensive would put him at a disadvantage. Especially because he wasn’t certain if they could survive Noint’s disintegrating light, should she choose to fire it.

Furthermore, his barrier’s greatest strength was also its biggest weakness. Since it partitioned space, Hajime couldn’t attack through it. And so, Hajime dismissed his barrier and prepared to flee. He needed to keep his distance and continue dodging until Tio arrived.

Just as he was about to leap back, he heard singing rise up from the Divine Mountain.

Hajime avoided Noint’s barrage of feathers and looked down. Ishtar was standing on the mountain, surrounded by an army of bishops and templar knights. The bishops were holding hands in a big circle and singing prayers.

Seeing the hundred-odd bishops chanting solemnly like that, Hajime was reminded of the time he’d heard a choir singing hymns back on earth.

But what on earth is the point of all that singing?

“Ah!? What the? My body’s—”

“Nagumo-kun!? Ah, wh-what is this...”

Hajime and Aiko felt something strange happen to their bodies. Their strength left them, and their mana began to disperse. It was as if

their energy was being drained away. Moreover, motes of light started sticking to them, making it hard to move.

“Ngh, this must be some kind of debuff magic. So this is the strength of the Holy Church’s best. Looks like they’ve got their defensive countermeasures all set up.” Hajime’s guess was spot-on.

When Ishtar had realized one of God’s Apostle’s was fighting, he’d gathered all of his followers. In order to support Noint’s battle, Ishtar had made them all sing the Hymn of Ruin.

The Hymn of Ruin was a powerful spell that dulled a target’s movements and sapped their strength. Unlike most spells which required a magic circle, this could only be activated by multiple bishops singing in tandem. It was the Holy Church’s trump card.

“Ishtar? He is someone who fully understands his role, unlike you. A good pawn.” Ishtar was gazing up at Noint with an expression full of rapture, and she reciprocated with her cold, unfeeling eyes.

He seemed ecstatic simply knowing he was helping Noint in her fight, as if there were no greater pleasure in life than serving her. Indeed, he was a convenient pawn who did as his masters bid.

Pawns or not, those guys just made this fight that much harder. This is going to be a huge pain.

Hajime bolstered his flagging strength with his vast reserves of mana and continued dodging Noint’s attacks. However, his movements weren’t nearly as sharp as before. Plus, Noint’s attacks were too strong for him to fend off forever in his weakened state.

A flood of lightning bolts shot out of Noint’s magic circles, each one tracing an erratic path toward Hajime.

Hajime shot down a number of them with Schlag, but he wasn’t able to dodge them all, and one bolt grazed him. It wasn’t terribly powerful, and the shock only made him stiffen for a moment.

However, that moment was all Noint needed.

“Wh—!?”

She closed in on Hajime instantly and swung her swords in a cross-shaped formation at him. With his reaction delayed, Hajime was only able to block the downward swing with Schlag. The sideways one grazed past his neck, drawing blood.

“Gaaah!” If the cut had been a few millimeters deeper, it would have severed his carotid artery. Cold sweat poured down his back.

Still, he knew he couldn’t let the fear get to him. Even as he screamed in pain, Hajime shot his elbow shotgun and used Aerodynamic to try and get out of Noint’s range.

Noint followed after him, of course, so he fired his Cross Bits wildly in her direction, keeping her on the defensive long enough to put some space between them.

“Nagumo-kun!?”

“I’m fine, just shut up!” Blood dripped from Hajime’s neck and onto Aiko’s cheek. He’d been protecting her from his Cross Bit’s shockwaves with Diamond Skin, but she’d still taken quite a beating. She was barely conscious, yet she was more worried for her student than for herself.

However, Hajime had no time to reassure her. Even as he gave her his curt reply, Noint fired off another barrage of feathers at him.

Hajime shot some down with Schlag and shredded others with his Gale Claw. The few that got past he endured with Diamond Skin. The motes of light, coupled with his exhaustion, meant he couldn’t dodge them all anymore.

Noint rushed forward, then pulled up just in front of Hajime. She spread her wings, which emitted a dazzling light. For a second, Hajime was blinded.

However, his perception skills were top-notch, even without his sight. He could tell Noint had circled behind him, so he turned around and fired a barrage of bullets into her.

His bullets shot right through... and destroyed the clone Noint had made out of feathers.

She had made a fake version of herself as bait.

“Ah!?” Hajime shivered. His instincts screamed at him to run. But he wouldn’t make it in time. There wasn’t even time to curse.

He snapped his arm back and pulled the trigger. Luckily, he’d aimed straight for her head. Unluckily, all Noint had to do was tilt it to the side to dodge.

She then raised one of her swords and cut diagonally downward into Hajime’s back.

Hajime used Diamond Skin’s derivative skill, Focused Strengthening, to guard his back. He still steeled himself to take a decent amount of damage.

For a short moment, his Diamond Skin held, but then the disintegration magic lining her sword destroyed his barrier and the tip of her blade dug into Hajime’s flesh.

“Gaaah!”

“Nagumo-kun!”

It felt as though his back was burning. Worried, Aiko opened her eyes and looked up at her pupil.

Even as he was cut through, Hajime planned for the next move. He used the force of Noint’s blow to somersault himself forward.

Then, he turned around to see Noint closing in for a follow-up attack. He knew his weakened body wouldn’t be able to move in time, so he covered one of his Cross Bits in Diamond Skin and had it act as his shield. The others he had flank Noint and attack her from both sides.

Noint twirled around without dropping speed, knocking down the explosive slugs with her wings. She then slammed her first sword into the Cross Bit Hajime was using as a shield. It stuck fast in the metal, so she slammed her second sword down on top of it, splitting it in half.

Hajime's eyes went wide with surprise. Noint looked coldly at him. Her chilling gaze made it clear that this would be the end.

But Hajime hadn't given up yet. He knew he'd have to make some sacrifices if he wanted to keep Aiko alive as well, so he was prepared to get hurt.

If I'd known she was this tough, I would have used Limit Break earlier. I thought I could save it until Tio got here... Hajime raised his prosthetic arm, planning on sacrificing it to survive another attack.

As Noint raised her swords above her, a thunderous roar split the air.

"Graaaaaaaaaah!" A second later, a beam of black light closed in on Noint.

It was Tio's dragon breath, the all-encompassing black light which could burn through anything. Noint had no time to dodge. And so, she cut short her attack and wrapped her wings around herself.

As Tio's breath hit Noint's wings, it began to disintegrate. Despite that, it still continued pushing her back. Black and silver mana warred against each other as Tio's breath pushed Noint all the way back into the cathedral tower. The force of the impact shattered the rest of the tower. Chunks of broken masonry fell to the ground.

Ishtar's bishops and templar knights cried out in despair. Seeing their beloved apostle get sent flying must have shaken their confidence.

Hajime instantly pulled Orkan out of his Treasure Trove and mercilessly fired all twelve rockets at Ishtar and his men.

This time they screamed for a different reason. Finally, Hajime heard the voice of someone he was actually eager to see.

"Master! Are you alright?" He didn't let his guard down, but Hajime smiled in relief.

At long last, Tio had arrived.

"Thanks, Tio. You saved my hide back there. Things got pretty dicey at the end." Tio smiled briefly, but then her expression grew grim again. If Hajime was hard-pressed, then this was an enemy that required her full attention. She flew up to where he was standing and stared at the tower along with Hajime.

"It is heartening to know I made it on time. As a reward, may I ask for a thorough spanking?"

"If you can get Sensei to safety, I'll think about it."

"Truly!? I will hold you to that, Master! Come, Sensei-dono. Climb

onto my back.”

Even now she puts her desires first, huh? Well, I guess Yue, Shea, and Kaori are like that too. Hajime sighed and put Aiko onto Tio’s back.

Aiko was pretty sure she heard some rather immoral things during that conversation, but she obediently let Hajime deposit her on Tio’s back. She didn’t want to be a burden any longer.

“Umm, Tio-san? I’m in your hands.”

“Indeed. Fear not. You are someone important to my master. I shall not let any harm come to you.”

Naturally, Tio meant that she was a teacher Hajime respected a great deal, but Aiko misinterpreted those words, thinking Hajime had a romantic interest in her.

Aiko looked worriedly over at Hajime. At this point anyone could tell those weren’t the eyes of a teacher worried about her student, but the eyes of a girl worried about the boy she loved.

Just then, the collapsed tower burst apart. Noint emerged from the rubble, completely unharmed. She flapped her silver wings, soaring once more into the sky. It appeared even Tio’s breath was incapable of piercing Noint’s defenses.

“Go, Tio.”

“As you wish. But allow me to assist you once I’ve delivered Sensei-dono to safety. Even if I can’t hurt her, I can definitely do something about those meddlesome priests.” Tio had already guessed that it was they who had weakened Hajime. She glared angrily at the surviving clergy while Hajime stared down Noint. The murderous glint in his eyes was back. Tio wanted to make sure he could focus on his fight without interruption.

Hajime grinned and nodded to Tio, glad to have such a reliable comrade. This time, he took the fight to Noint.

“Be careful, Nagumo-kun! I don’t want you to get hurt anymore!”

“Hm? Ah, I see now. How fascinating...”

Tio watched as Aiko clasped her hands together and prayed for Hajime’s safety. She could easily tell the teacher was in love with her student. In an amused voice, Tio spoke to her.

“Sensei-dono, I understand your concern, but we must hurry. Once I have delivered you to the palace, I need to eliminate those pests for Master. I cannot allow them to interfere with his duel.” Tio turned to the ground, but Aiko stopped her. She looked over her shoulder to see Aiko looking resolutely down at her.

“Tio-san. Won’t it take too long to take me down and then come back? We’re eight thousand meters up. A full trip would waste too much time...”

“Hm? You do have a point, but... Wait, you couldn’t possibly mean to—”

“That’s right. If you’re going to help Nagumo-kun fight, then let me fight with you. We have to do something about Ishtar-san quickly, or Nagumo-kun won’t be able to win. You can’t afford to waste time taking me all the way down.” Aiko had a point, but it still didn’t sit well with Tio.

Hajime’s missiles had injured a good number of the bishops, but they’d already begun to regroup. They’d worked together to erect a barrier and were preparing to resume their hymn. Tio, too, wanted to stop them before they had a chance to start up again. But if she let harm come to Aiko, she would have broken her promise to Hajime.

“I don’t mean to be rude, but what exactly can you do, Sensei-dono? You have no battle experience, correct? Nor do you have any magic circles on you. How do you propose to fight against those bishops and knights?” Aiko grit her teeth. Tio was right. But then an idea suddenly dawned on her. She closed her eyes, put her finger in her mouth, and bit down hard. She dripped some blood on the back of her other hand and quickly sketched a magic circle.

“Despite how I look, my magic is as strong as Amanogawa-kun’s. I may not have any combat experience, but... I can at least support you! Honestly... I’m terrified of fighting fellow humans. Still, at this point, there’s no other choice. I understand now that empty idealism will get me nowhere! If I want to get my students safely back to Japan, then I can’t run away. I have to stand before my students and fight for them!” The kingdom had been invaded, and the bishops had all turned into religious fanatics. At this point, relying on Ishtar’s god to get back home was clearly pointless. Aiko and the other students would have to carve their own path in this world.

In which case, she would no longer hesitate. If there was dirty work that needed to be done, she would do it. She resolved to never again let someone else pull the trigger for her.

Tio hesitated when she saw the determination in Aiko’s eyes. Eventually, however, she gave in and let Aiko have her way.

“If you’ve committed to this path, then I suppose I have no choice. I’m sure Master won’t mind if this is truly what you want. Very well. Let us slaughter those fools together!”

“Thank you!” Aiko was nervous, but her newfound resolve weighed much more heavily. Together with Tio, she headed for the Holy Church’s great cathedral.

They were up against hundreds of knights and bishops, but that didn’t seem to frighten them in the least. Their odd tag-team combo was about to take on the strongest religious group in the world.

The first thing Hajime did once his hands were free was pull out Schlagen and let loose on Noint.

Sparks ran down the barrel's length as Hajime accelerated the bullet within. It shot out faster than the eye could follow, leaving a red streak in its wake.

Schlagen possessed enough firepower to pierce through even Tio's breath. Noint's wings wouldn't be able to disintegrate its bullets easily. She seemed to have noticed that as well, and chose to dodge rather than block.

Flying underneath the bullet, Noint charged toward Hajime. However, Hajime was ready for her. His Cross Bits intercepted her and fired explosive slugs at near point-blank range.

"Ah!?" Noint realized she wouldn't be able to cocoon herself in her wings in time, so she slashed at the bullets with her sword.

It cut through the slugs like a knife through hot butter, bisecting Hajime's bullets.

Though Noint's sword dissolved some of the mana stored inside Hajime's bullets, it wasn't able to negate the shockwaves completely.

Pulses of mana assailed Noint from all sides, slowing her movements for a split second.

Hajime took advantage of that opening and rushed in. He leaped off his mid-air platform and transferred all of his momentum into his left arm. At the same time, he activated Steel Arms, along with the oscillating vibrator in his prosthetic limb. He also fired another shotgun blast from his elbow to further accelerate his punch.

"Haaah!"

"Ah!?" Noint hurriedly raised her second sword in front of her to block. She barely got it up in time. Hajime's fist crashed into it a second later.

There was the deafening clash of metal against metal. Though she blocked the blow itself, the force of Hajime's punch sent Noint flying.

Hajime knew he couldn't give her time to rest. And so, he unholstered Donner and Schlag and fired a follow-up barrage at her.

There were two loud explosions as two streaks of red shot toward Noint.

Though Noint saw only two streaks, twelve bullets slammed into the swords she'd held up to guard her vitals.

"Gaaah!" Hajime had fired so fast and so accurately that each bullet had followed the exact same path at almost the same time, which was why it had appeared at first to only be two shots.

For the first time, the supposedly invincible angel's beautiful face twisted in pain. Her twin swords cracked as they took the brunt of the bullets.

Hajime was amazed they didn't shatter. Not many things could take a fully-powered punch along with a railgun barrage without shattering.

Noint sailed through the air and crashed into another one of the Holy Church's buildings, pulverizing it.

Refusing to let up, Hajime pulled Orkan out of his Treasure Trove and fired a barrage of missiles at her as well. They trailed a cloud of sparks as they flew through the building, decimating what little remained of its walls.

The rockets exploded, unleashing their payload of superheated tar. The tar ignited instantly, coating the building in sticky, three-thousand degree flames.

Hajime watched the flames dye the sky red as he prepared his next attack. He reloaded Orkan with missiles from his Treasure Trove and took aim at the burning rubble of what had once been a church.

Just before he fired, however, he noticed his quarry was no longer there.

"Tch, below, huh?" Hajime looked down in time to see the ground below him erupt. Noint appeared from within, flapping her wings to close in on Hajime.

It appeared she'd escaped his rockets by tunneling into the mountainside. Then, she swept her wings and fired another barrage of silver feathers at Hajime.

He swayed from side to side, like a leaf blown in the wind, weaving between the storm of feathers. As Noint passed by, she swung down with her twin greatswords. Hajime somersaulted in midair, dodging out of the way. At the same time, he fired Orkan's missiles at her.

Noint had tasted their power once already, so she wasn't very eager to do so again. She flattened her wings and sped forward like a silver meteor, outpacing the missiles chasing after her. Noint continued firing feathers behind her as she retreated, while also bombarding him with magic from the hundreds of magic circles she'd created.

Magic and missiles clashed, annihilating each other in a magnificent explosion. Hajime dropped Orkan back into his Treasure Trove and drew his twin revolvers. He shot down the remaining spells coming for him, blowing apart the core of each spell.

For a few seconds, there was silence as Hajime and Noint stared each other down.

"Hey, you sure you should be wasting your time with me?"

"What do you mean?"

There's no way someone from the Holy Church doesn't know about the invasion happening in the capital. Until now they'd been fighting nonstop, so Hajime hadn't had a chance to talk. But since there was finally a pause in the hostilities, he figured he should ask.

"I'm talking about what's happening below. If things keep going

like this, the kingdom's gonna fall. And once that happens, you know the Divine Mountain's going to be next. Shouldn't you be stopping the demons taking over your city instead of fighting up here?" Hajime had thought it a perfectly logical question, but Noint looked at him as if he'd said something ridiculous.

"If that does happen, it simply means that is how this age is fated to end."

"That's it, huh? So in the end, Ehit doesn't see people as anything more than playthings. He just took their side this time, but in the next era maybe he'll side with someone else? So is the god the demons worship one of Ehit's lackeys or something too? Or is it just the guy himself in disguise?"

"And if he is?"

"I was just wondering whether or not the Liberators had been telling the truth. If you ask me, you're both shady as hell."

Noint's eyebrows twitched. It seemed being called shady didn't sit well with her. Still, despite her obvious displeasure, Hajime simply grinned at her and continued.

"Hey, if you really think I'm a nuisance, just send me back to my own world. If the kingdom falls, the rest of the heroes will just have proven they weren't very useful pawns, so you may as well send them back too."

"I refuse, Irregular."

"Mind telling me why?"

"Because my master wishes for your deaths. Yours especially. You survived hardships that would have broken normal people, obtained unimaginable power, and found trustworthy comrades to aid you in your journey... Now, all that's left is for you to fall before achieving your goal. For that is the kind of fate my master wishes upon you. So I kindly request that you die in a blaze of agony, suffering, and despair. After all, that is what shall please my master the most. The hero and his friends, on the other hand... appear to be up to something my master finds interesting, so he is content to leave them alone. As long as they continue entertaining him, he shall not remove them from the game board."

Hajime had expected that answer, so he wasn't terribly surprised. He shrugged his shoulders and thought back to what Miledi Reisen had said.

You're right, the gods really are conniving little bastards.

There was one thing that Noint said that stuck out in Hajime's mind, though.

"You said the others are up to something?"

"As you are about to die, there is no need for you to know." At that, Noint unleashed another barrage of feathers and magic, putting

an end to their conversation. Her assault was far more ferocious than before. Her feathers were as fast as Hajime's bullets, and the spells she was casting were all high-level. A silver aura coated Noint's body, and she seemed to grow in size. She looked just like Hajime or Kouki when they were using Limit Break.

"Ah!" Hajime faced down the torrent of magic and feathers, Metzelei in his right hand and Schlagen in his left. He mowed down Noint's attacks with Metzelei, the machine gun that fired twelve thousand bullets a minute. At the same time, he sniped at Noint with Schlagen.

She reacted much faster than before, though.

The instant before Hajime's bullet hit her, her figure blurred. She vanished, and reappeared a few meters away.

She then charged at Hajime, right through the hail of bullets. Honestly, she moved so fast that she left afterimages in her wake.

Hajime tracked her movements with Foresight and tried to intercept her with his Cross Bits. However, his explosive slugs hit only air as they passed through her afterimages.

A second later, Noint appeared behind him, still trailing afterimages in her wake. Then, she spun like a top, swinging her twin blades at Hajime.

"Tch!" Noint had moved so fast that not even Rift Walk had allowed Hajime to keep up with her movements.

Hajime managed to duck out of the way in time, but her swords passed through Schlagen, cutting it cleanly in half. That made the energy from his Lightning Field discharge, and a huge explosion blossomed between the two of them.

The explosion made Noint hesitate for a second, allowing Hajime to mount a counterattack.

Crimson streaks of mana wrapped themselves around his body. He'd activated Limit Break. Then, he rushed forward at the same time Noint did. He was no longer holding Metzelei, but had instead drawn Donner and Schlag.

The two of them began trading blows at point-blank range.

"Taaaaaah!"

"Haaaaaah!"

Hajime twisted to the side to avoid Noint's downward swing. Before the first sword had even passed by, her second blade came in from the side. Still, he managed to get Schlag underneath it and fired upward, pushing her sword out of the way. At the same time, he fired Donner directly at her heart.

Noint circled out of the way, and Hajime's bullet passed harmlessly through an afterimage. She cut diagonally upward with her first blade as she did so.

Hajime enhanced Schlag with Diamond Skin and Focused Strengthening. He hardened only the part of the barrel that he used to block Noint's sword, allowing him to multiply the skill's effects. Due to that, Noint's sword knocked Schlag out of the way, but didn't break it.

He blocked Noint's second sword with Donner's muzzle, and fired just as the sword made contact. The bullet knocked the blade out of the way.

Hajime and Noint continued dancing around each other, dodging and trading blows. They fought to the utmost limits of their abilities, each trying to land a decisive blow. Their concentration was so absolute that they both forgot to breathe, to blink.

"Uwooooooooooooooh!"

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

The two screamed at each other as they charged again.

A single mistake, a single lapse in concentration meant instant death.

They were moving so fast that there was no time to even think. They simply moved on instinct, trusting in their abilities, experience, and reflexes to carry them through.

Streaks of silver and crimson light dotted the sky as Noint's swords and Hajime's guns clashed over and over.

The storm of blows unleashed pulses of energy like a solar flare. The two continued speeding up, each trying to gain an edge over the other.

Before long, they were both drenched in blood, covered in a dozen small wounds. Hajime had shallow cuts all over his body, while Noint had bullet holes everywhere.

The two of them were evenly matched. Well, at that very moment, anyway. Hajime knew that the longer this continued, the harder it would get for him.

He'd realized that since the start of the fight, Noint's mana reserves hadn't gone down at all.

Hajime's Limit Break, on the other hand, had a time limit. Once he hit it, the spell would be forcibly canceled, and he'd be left in a weakened state. Though Hajime's own mana reserves were vast, they weren't infinite.

Noint, however, seemed to be receiving unlimited mana from some unknown source. She would be able to maintain this state indefinitely.

Hajime examined her with his Demon Eye, trying to find what was supplying her with so much mana. He noticed a brilliantly glowing mana crystal was where her heart should have been.

He knew a protracted fight would be the end for him, so he bet

everything on an all or nothing attack.

“Take this!” Hajime brought forth all of his Cross Bits, and fired a full-powered barrage of explosive slugs. He knew at this range the shockwaves would hit him too, but he was prepared for that.

“Have you lost your mind?” Surprise colored Noint’s normally emotionless eyes. Hajime’s actions seemed suicidal to her.

Dozens of explosive slugs shot out of Hajime’s six Cross Bits, enveloping the both of them in a whirlwind of shockwaves.

Noint wrapped her wings around herself, while Hajime activated Diamond Skin.

A massive crimson flower blossomed in the sky.

Dozens of shockwaves mercilessly pummeled Hajime and Noint’s bodies. They punched through Hajime’s Diamond Skin, severely damaging his internal organs. He gasped in pain and coughed up blood. The attack had left him devastated.

Noint, too, had suffered greatly. Her wings hadn’t been able to protect her completely, so she coughed up blood, her bullet wounds bleeding more than before. Her innards had been hit just as hard.

“Were you planning on dying together with me?”

“Haaah... Haaah... Give me a break. Who’d want to do a double suicide with you? Try saying that again when you’re at least half the woman my girlfriend is.” Hajime was panting with exhaustion, but his tone was light, as if he wasn’t worried at all. He scoffed at Noint. *Who the hell would waste their life trying to kill you?*

He pulled another weapon out of his Treasure Trove. It was small enough to fit between his fingers, and he flung it at Noint as if he were throwing a playing card.

The object made no sound as it traveled through the air, and was barely visible in the night sky, yet Noint casually batted it aside with her sword.

The fifteen-centimeter wide donut-shaped object spun away into the darkness. It resembled the chakrams Hajime had seen back on earth.

“Did you honestly believe something like this would work? Have you finally run out of idea— Ah!?” Noint had thought this was simply the final, futile struggle of one who’d already lost, but then Hajime pulled out his revolvers and started firing them to his sides.

Though Noint was directly in front of him, the bullets he fired suddenly appeared to her left and right, with all of them aiming for her head.

She instantly raised her swords to either side, using them as shields. Twelve bullets slammed into Noint’s swords in a burst of sparks. Like before, they all slammed into the same point.

Somehow, Hajime’s bullets had gone right for Noint despite the

fact that he'd fired them in a completely different direction.

The secret to their sudden change in direction was in the chakrams he had thrown earlier. They had been enchanted with Hide Presence and Gale Claw, making them very useful assassination tools, but that wasn't all they were capable of. He'd also enchanted them with spatial magic. They functioned as the same kind of warp gate that he'd made to kill the sea angel in the Sunken Ruins of Melusine.

If he shot something through one of his chakrams, it would appear out of the one paired with it. Furthermore, he'd made his chakrams of spirit stone, so he could control them freely like his Cross Bits.

Hajime had calculated everything, from Noint's reaction time, to her position, to the approximate direction she'd knock his chakrams away to. And now, his barrage of bullets hit her swords exactly where he'd expected them to. *Crack! Crack!* Both of Noint's swords snapped in half.

"Wha!? How... It shouldn't have been that powerful..." *She sure gets surprised a lot for someone who said they don't have emotions.*

Noint hadn't noticed, but Hajime had been focusing his attacks on a certain point of her swords. During their entire close-combat fight, he'd made sure to aim his attacks at her swords.

It was precisely because he'd known their abilities were around equal that he'd tried to tip the scales by going for her weapons.

Hajime took advantage of the opening he'd created and pulled more artifacts out of his Treasure Trove, all of which he sent hurtling toward Noint.

Noint wasn't able to dodge the ten or so objects he'd thrown at her, so she tried to knock them down with her shattered blades.

However, that was the worst possible move she could have made. What Hajime had thrown at her were wire bolas that were weighed down by ore on each side.

Normally you had to wind them up a little before throwing them, but as these were made of spirit stone, Hajime could control their flight directly without needing the extra centrifugal force. And naturally, they weren't any ordinary bolas.

"Ah! I can't move!?" The bolas wrapped around Noint's swords, her arms, and her legs, then stopped in place. The spheres attached to the ends of the wires began pulsing with energy. Like everything else, they'd been enhanced with creation magic. He'd enchanted them with spatial magic so that they would be fixed in place, which in turn meant anything they captured would be trapped as well.

Of course, since Noint could disintegrate objects, even something as overpowered as that wouldn't be enough to hold her for long. Moreover, it was impossible to seal her wings. Even if Hajime had trapped them with his bolas, Noint could make them vanish and

reappear at will. With her skills, she could buy enough time to do that as well.

Still, all Hajime needed was to hold her in place for a few seconds. That was enough time to hit her with his finishing move.

He wasn't going to let this fight go on any longer. Hajime pulled a massive, two-meter long cannon out of his Treasure Trove.

It was his railgun-enhanced pile bunker. Sparks ran down the cannon's length as it began charging. A high-pitched mechanical whirr prickled Hajime's ears. He dashed forward, cannon in hand.

"Ngh..." Noint wrapped her wings around herself like a cocoon. The light emanating from them intensified, and she glowed like a second moon.

Hajime rammed his pile bunker into her beautiful barrier. The four arms attached themselves to her wings, fixing the cannon in place. They'd been enchanted with spatial magic, so Noint wouldn't be able to dissolve them easily. The cannon's length was coated in red sparks. It seemed the bunker was nearly charged.

"Let's see you block this one." Hajime's lips twisted up into a feral grin, murder in his eyes.

He was wreathed in a blinding crimson aura, the light of his Limit Break eclipsing Noint's silver glow.

A tiny, invisible shockwave ran across the muzzle's length as the pile bunker shot forward.

Hajime had added even more features to his ultimate weapon. He'd enchanted the stake with a compacted version of Void Fissure. The vibrations from the spell decimated the defenses of anything the stake touched.

On top of that, gravity magic increased the weight of the stake to over twenty tons as it shot out. There was a thunderous bang as the charged energy drove the stake down.

The atmosphere trembled as it slammed into Noint's wings.

Powered by blastrock, Hajime's Lightning Field, and the force of his mana, the spinning Azantium stake bore through her defenses.

It shredded her wings easily, and punched straight through her heart. The tip of the stake passed through her back where her wings sprouted, and kept going.

It flew off into the horizon like a meteorite, trailing red sparks behind it.

"Ah—"

"....."

There was a gaping hole where her crystal heart, the source of her mana, had been. As Hajime's Lightning Field had surrounded the stake, it had cauterized the wound, so no blood dripped from the hole. The last remnants of Noint's wings dissipated, leaving her looking

smaller than before. Even now, there wasn't a trace of human emotion in her eyes.

Though Hajime couldn't help but feel that there was a hint of reproach in her expression. The light slowly left her pupils, and she fell lifelessly to the mountainside below.

Her glowing silver figure was easy to spot on the dark ground underneath.

Hajime slowly lowered himself to where she had landed, and pointed Donner at her head. His Demon Eye and his Sense Presence skill both told him she was well and truly dead, but he wouldn't rest easily until he'd blown her head off. It had become somewhat of a bad habit of his.

"Looks like this 'Irregular' was more than you could handle." He wrapped his finger around the trigger. However, before he could pull it, he was interrupted...

Boooooooooooooooooooooom! By an explosion so powerful it shook the entire mountain.

Hajime turned around to see a giant mushroom cloud rising above where the Holy Church's main cathedral had been.

"No way." Hajime's muttered words melted away into the night.

He stared, slack-jawed, as the Holy Church crumbled to nothing. He'd only ever seen something like this in old war documentaries back on earth. Just then, he received a telepathic message.

"M-Master...Are you alright?"

"Huh? Oh, Tio. Yeah, I managed to finish off my opponent..."

"I see. Wonderful. I expected no less from you. We've finished up here as well, can you meet up with us?"

"I don't mind but uhh, I think I just witnessed something amazing..."

"We can explain that. Or rather, we were the cause of it..."

"What?"

"For now, let's rendezvous."

"Gotcha, works for me."

Hajime hurried over to where Tio said she was. Apparently, she knew what had utterly obliterated the Holy Church's main temple and its core followers.

As he flew into the air, he spotted Tio in her dragon form flying a short distance away from the mushroom cloud.

Riding on her back was Aiko, who seemed to be panicking over something. *What's Sensei doing here? Actually, knowing her I think I can guess. She must have asked Tio to let her help. She'd never run while others are fighting, after all.*

What interested Hajime more was why Aiko was acting like she'd just done something she wasn't supposed to.

“Sensei, Tio. Looks like you’re both alright.”

“Th-Thank goodness you’re alright, Nagumo-kun! I was really worried.”

“Master. For a moment back there I thought we might be done for, but we somehow made it out alive. I suppose I should have known your teacher would be just as dangerous as you. I did not expect my breath to become so powerful with her help. I must say, I’m impressed.”

Hajime blinked in confusion. Then, with an incredulous look, he turned to Aiko.

“Sensei, what on earth did you do?”

“Awawawawa! I-It’s not what you think! I didn’t mean for it to end up like this. It’s just, the pope’s barrier was really strong so... I thought maybe if I amplified the strength of Tio-san’s breath, she’d be able to break through it...”

Aiko began panicking once again, her relief from seeing Hajime safe forgotten. Though her explanation was a little haphazard, Hajime more or less got the gist of what had happened.

Aiko had decided to help Tio fight Ishtar and the other bishops in order to prevent them from weakening Hajime.

However, she’d had no magic circles handy. So even though she was an outstanding magician, she hadn’t been able to offer any offensive support. Moreover, the main cathedral had apparently been an artifact that deployed a barrier around itself. The barrier was quite powerful, and not even Tio’s breath could breach it.

Unless Aiko did something, Ishtar and the others would be able to cast their spell without interruption. While Tio had been dodging attacks from the Templar Knights, Aiko wracked her brains over how best to neutralize the barrier. Eventually, she realized that her job had just the skill for this situation.

These were her current stats at the time:

Aiko Hatayama Age: 25 Female Level: 56

Job: Farmer

Strength: 190

Vitality: 380

Defense: 190

Agility: 310 NPNI Magic: 820

Magic Defense: 280

Skills: Soil Management — Soil Restoration [+ Automatic Restoration] — Large-scale Cultivation [+ Improved Scale] [+ Contamination Conversion] — Enhanced Fertilization — Selective Breeding — Plant Appraisal — Fertilizer Production — Mixed Breeding — Auto Harvesting — Fermentation Proficiency [+ Fermentation Acceleration] [+ Large-scale Fermentation] — Wide-area Temperature

Control [+ Temperature Optimization] [+ Weather Barrier]— Farming Barrier — Fertile Rain — Language Comprehension.

The skill Aiko had used had been Fermentation.

Though the mountain itself was made of rock, it was inhabited by people. That meant there were plenty of things lying around for Aiko to ferment. Though this was Tortus and not earth, most organic materials still emitted a gas similar to methane when they fermented.

So she'd fermented everything she could reach, filling the church with a flammable gas. Since Fermentation wasn't an offensive spell, the cathedral's barrier hadn't blocked it. It had to let things like gas and air through, or the people inside wouldn't be able to survive after all. Tio had used wind magic to control the atmosphere around it too, making sure the gas didn't disperse.

Once Aiko had created enough flammable gas, Tio had fired her breath at it, hoping the combination would be enough to destroy the church's barrier. Except it had done a lot more than just destroy the barrier.

"So that's what happened."

"Indeed. We were blown away by the explosion as well. I truly thought I was about to die. Not only did it destroy the barrier, but it took the entirety of the church along with it... I have never seen such a strange way to fight in my life. Your mentor is someone to be feared, Master. I am in awe of her abilities."

"It's not like that! I didn't think the explosion would really be that big! I just wanted to make sure there'd be enough to destroy the barrier! Really! Wait! What happened to all the bishops and knights!?"

Aiko turned her gaze back to the church in a panic, as if she'd only just remembered them. Hajime and Tio followed her gaze, examining the rubble of the cathedral.

"Well, they were probably blown away too." The cathedral had been so utterly demolished no one could recognize what it had been originally. *There's no way any of them survived that.*

"They put too much faith in their barrier. I am certain they had no contingency measures in place in case it was ever destroyed. And I suspect they could not have survived an explosion like that head-on."

"B-But then... I mean, I was prepared to fight, but..."

Aiko paled as she realized she was responsible for the death of the Holy Church's leadership. She'd been prepared to fight, and perhaps even to kill, but not like this.

She doubled over and vomited. Hajime scratched his head, at a loss for what to say. He drew close and grabbed Aiko's vomit-stained hands. If nothing else, maybe some human warmth would do her good.

The warmth of his hands was the only thing that kept her from

sinking into the depths of despair. Completely forgetting that they were still student and teacher, Aiko flung herself into Hajime's arms and started bawling her eyes out.

"My poor back... Well, I suppose it's not such a big deal." Tio grumbled about the vomit on her back as she started casting restoration magic.

Ideally, Tio would have liked to let Aiko stand back up on her own. Tio was the one who'd actually shot the breath, so there was no need for Aiko to blame herself. But they didn't have time for a long discussion about this, so Tio settled for using restoration magic to stabilize Aiko's sanity.

Her spirits somewhat restored, Aiko looked up at Hajime. Though her face was covered in tears and snot and vomit, Hajime didn't seem to mind too much. He casually pulled a towel out of his Treasure Trove and wiped her face down. Embarrassed, Aiko meekly let him clean her up.

"Have you finally calmed down, Sensei?"

"Y-Yes. I-I'm fine now. Nagumo-kun..." Aiko flushed red. A slight hint of longing entered her voice when she said Hajime's name. It was clear from the way she was looking at him that it wasn't just embarrassment that had caused her to blush.

Until now, Hajime had only seen Aiko as his teacher and nothing more. But now that she was looking at him like that, he was forced to consider that she might be in love with him. *You're kidding, right? This isn't really happening, is it?* Hajime thought with a stiff expression.

Hajime quickly averted his gaze, just as Tio called out a warning.

"Master. There's someone here. They don't appear normal..."

"What?"

Did someone actually manage to survive that explosion? Hajime followed Tio's gaze, incredulous. Standing in the ruins of the church was a bald, white-robed man. He was staring directly at Hajime. Like Tio had said, there was something off about the man. "For one thing, he was translucent. For another, he was swaying back and forth like a stalk in the breeze."

The moment he felt Hajime's gaze on him, the man silently turned around and floated across the mountain of rubble. He didn't seem to be walking, nor did he seem affected by gravity.

Just before he vanished out of sight, he turned around and looked at Hajime once more.

"Does he want us to follow him or something?"

"So it seems. What should we do, Master?"

"Hmm. Honestly, I want to meet back up with Yue and Shea, but... supposedly one of the ancient magics is located here. It's possible this ghost dude has something to do with that. Better not to

let any leads slip past us.”

“Hrm. Very well, let us follow him then.”

Tio flew up to the top of the pile of rubble, let Hajime and Aiko down, and transformed back into her human form. She frowned as she noticed the stain on her back, and pulled out a replacement set of clothes from her own Treasure Trove. Hajime, too, changed out of his bloodied, vomit-stained clothes into something clean.

“Ugh, I’m sorry... I got your clothes dirty...” Aiko seemed to shrink into herself as she apologized. Vomiting all over someone was one of the most embarrassing things there was.

Though neither Hajime nor Tio seemed that bothered by it, Aiko still couldn’t get over her feelings of shame. Especially because she was coming to terms with the fact that she might be in love with Hajime. Vomiting on someone was bad enough without it being the guy you have a crush on.

Hajime didn’t have time to wait for her to get over it, so he decided to change the topic.

“Sorry, Sensei, but you’re gonna have to come with us. There’s no telling what might happen up ahead, but we can’t let this chance go. I wanna find out what that bald guy is.”

“O-Okay. I understand, I’ll come with you.”

She put an awful lot emphasis onto that last sentence. Hajime pretended he hadn’t noticed, and continued following after the strange bald man.

The translucent man stayed ahead of them, guiding Hajime and the others through the maze of rubble. After about five minutes of walking, they arrived at their destination. The man silently turned back to Hajime and stood in place.

“What exactly are you? And what do you want with us?”

“.....”

The bald man didn’t reply. Instead, he lifted a finger and pointed deeper into the rubble. Hajime couldn’t see anything special there, but it was clear that was where the man wanted him to go.

Realizing he wouldn’t get anywhere questioning the man, Hajime nodded to Tio and started walking. As he arrived at the indicated location, the rubble around him began to float. The ground underneath started glowing. He looked down to see one of the labyrinth’s crests carved into the ground.

“Are you one of the Liberators?” Just as he finished his question, the light from the ground enveloped him.

A second later, they were standing in an unfamiliar room. It wasn’t very big. The walls were painted black, and there was a magic circle in the center. Next to the circle was an old pedestal, and atop that pedestal was a book. It seemed they’d been teleported straight to

the end of the labyrinth.

The three of them walked up to the magic circle. Aiko looked around, obviously confused by what was going on. Hajime took her hand and looked over at Tio. The two of them nodded to each other and stepped into the magic circle, Aiko following behind.

Hajime braced for the usual memory-reading that happened when he stepped into one of these. However, this time, it was different. It felt like the memory probe was reaching far deeper into his brain, and he groaned in pain. He worried he might have walked into a trap, but that worry vanished a second later. He was verified as someone who had conquered this labyrinth, and the ancient magic of this labyrinth's Liberator was imprinted into his mind.

"Spirit magic?"

"Hrm. It seems this magic lets you interfere directly with others' souls."

"I get it now. So this is how Miledi was able to transfer her soul into that golem..."

Aiko crouched down and cradled her head. It was her first time receiving ancient magic, and the experience of something engraving itself directly into her memories was disconcerting. Hajime watched her for a few seconds out of the corner of his eye, before walking over to the nearby pedestal and picking up the book on top of it.

He flipped through the pages. It appeared to be a memorandum left behind by Laus Barn, the creator of this labyrinth. It was written similarly to Oscar Orcus' journal. The memorandum detailed Laus' life with the Liberators, and what he did with his life.

As Hajime had little interest in the Liberators' lives, he skimmed over it. Laus Barn's legacy didn't interest him in the least. The memorandum mentioned why he hadn't left his soul behind in this world like Miledi had, and what he'd had to repent for, but Hajime skipped through those sections.

At the very end, it explained the conditions needed to clear his labyrinth. First, you had to have cleared at least two labyrinths. Second, you needed to have disavowed the gods of this world.

Third, you needed to have defeated someone under god's direct influence. Only then would Laus' ghost apparition appear and guide challengers to this room. In other words, the theme of this labyrinth was to test challengers' resolve. They needed to prove their desire to overthrow the gods was unshakable.

Hajime guessed that if they had taken the normal route through the mountain, they would have faced a number of trials that tested their determination. Though Aiko hadn't officially disavowed this world's gods, she had always prioritized her students over everyone else. On top of that, she'd contributed to the destruction of the main

cathedral. That had been good enough for Laus to consider her an official conqueror of this labyrinth too.

Most native residents of this world would be hard-pressed to fulfill Laus' conditions, but for Hajime and the others, it was easy to denounce the gods.

Hajime took Laus' ring and his book. Aiko had recovered from the shock of having her mind probed, and business here was concluded, so the three of them walked back to the magic circle that had brought them here. Laus Barn's crest glowed, and they returned to the mountain.

"You alright, Sensei?"

"Ugh, yes. I think I can manage... I'm amazed that such magic exists though. If there's something like this out there, then maybe magic that can take us back to Japan really exists too."

Aiko rubbed her temples and nodded to herself.

The events of the past few days had taken their toll on her, but she was excited about the prospect of finding an alternative way home.

"Alright, we know where the labyrinth is now. Let's go meet up with Yue and Shea and bring them back here."

"I almost forgot! The capital is under attack right now, isn't it? I hope everyone's alright..." At Hajime's prompting, the three of them began descending the mountain. Time was short, so they jumped off the cliffside where the lift usually was. That section had been carved smooth, so there was no worry of hitting jutting rocks.

Aiko screamed the whole way down, but both Hajime and Tio ignored her.

They landed safely, though Hajime had to support Aiko as her legs had given out. The capital was awash in flames, but Hajime's first priority was getting Aiko to safety. So he ignored the screams coming from the streets and headed to the palace, planning to meet up with Kaori and Liliana.

When he arrived at the meeting point... he found Kaori lying dead on the ground, a sword sticking out of her chest.

Chapter IV: Betrayal

Let us go back to a few hours ago. Right around when Kaori and Liliana had snuck into the palace.

Craaaaaaaaash!

“Huh!? What’s going on!?” Shizuku jolted awake as she heard the sound of shattering glass. She threw off her sheets, grabbed her katana, and jumped to her feet. Her instantaneous reaction made it clear that she was always on guard, even when she slept.

“.....” Shizuku tensed up and held her breath, ready for an attack. Only after she had ascertained there was no one else in her room did she allow herself to relax.

She had been even more vigilant than usual these past few days. People had started vanishing mysteriously from the palace.

The disappearances had begun a few weeks after they’d been saved from death in the Great Orcus Labyrinth and Kaori had gone off with Hajime.

Shizuku had been worried about them since day one. She couldn’t tell what exactly was wrong, but her sixth sense had told her that *something* wasn’t right.

At first, she had just chalked it up to stress. Her best friend wasn’t by her side anymore, the demons were far stronger than they had expected, and everyone was struggling with the problem of whether or not they could really kill. It was possible she was just on edge.

But eventually she realized her senses weren’t deceiving her. Something was definitely wrong.

It wasn’t until today until she had proof though.

Three days ago, Aiko had returned and told Shizuku that she’d had something important to tell everyone that night. Right after that, she had disappeared. Dinner came and went, and she was nowhere to be found.

Furthermore, Liliana vanished that same day. The palace guards and servants were panicking.

Two people Shizuku knew well had vanished without a trace. Yuka and the rest of Ai-chan’s guard squad started searching frantically for them. Kouki and the others helped out, of course.

It was then that Ishtar had shown up and told them that Aiko had gone up to the Divine Mountain to make their argument against Hajime being declared a heretic.

Naturally, Shizuku and the others had demanded Ishtar let them join her, but he'd refused. The lift heading to the main cathedral at the top of the mountain wasn't working, and there was no other way to the temple.

They took their complaints to King Eilheid, but he simply told them that Aiko would return in three days and that they should just wait. Reluctantly, the students backed down.

Shizuku's worries continued to grow. She still had no proof that anything was happening, but she was certain something bad was. Worse, Captain Meld had vanished too, so she couldn't ask him for advice either.

Three days. If we just sit tight for three days... Three days had passed, and the morning of the invasion dawned.

Neither Aiko nor Liliana returned.

Ishtar and the other priests had vanished as well. Not only that, the guards they'd assigned Aiko, David and his squad, had disappeared too. The lift to the main cathedral still wasn't working.

Both the king and the prime minister refused to meet with the students.

In another day, it would be four days since Aiko and Liliana disappeared.

However, it seemed only Yuka and Shizuku were worried about that.

Though Kouki did think it was odd Aiko hadn't returned, he couldn't fathom that something dangerous might be going on within the palace itself. He thought the discussion about Hajime's heresy was just dragging on.

Shizuku could tell Kouki's conflicted feelings regarding Hajime were clouding his judgment. Moreover, his mind was too preoccupied with thoughts of Kaori, and whether or not he could really kill, to think about much else.

Since most of the other students still looked up to him, the fact that he wasn't worried about Aiko was enough to reassure them that they didn't need to be either. If he said she was okay, she was okay.

So Shizuku had decided to consult Yuka and her friends. They were the only other students who shared her sense of unease.

They decided that if Aiko didn't return by tonight, they'd scale the mountain, lift or no lift.

After finishing her preparations for tomorrow's climb, Shizuku had climbed into bed fully alert. Aiko hadn't returned, and she was growing suspicious of everyone in the castle. Which brings us back to the present.

Shizuku silently put on her equipment and slipped out of her room.

She silently cursed as her door made a slight squeaking noise when she pushed it open.

Looking down the hallway, Shizuku noticed that Yuka, Taeko, and Nana were standing outside their rooms as well. They were standing stock still, timidly examining their surroundings.

“Ah, Shizucchi!” Nana spotted Shizuku and called out to her without thinking. Shizuku instantly put one hand on her sword. Yuka and Taeko bopped Nana on the head, furiously whispering “Idiot, what if that was an intruder!?” “Don’t be so careless, idiot!”

Nana apologized tearfully, while Shizuku waved her hand to let them know the coast was clear.

Yuka and the others stepped into the hallway while Shizuku jogged over to Kouki’s room and knocked.

The door swung open immediately. Kouki was standing there, fully dressed. Behind him, Ryutarou was in the process of getting up. It seemed the sound had woken them as well.

Shizuku sighed, and looked at Kouki with a pained expression.

“Kouki, you really need to be more careful. Don’t just open the door for anyone who knocks... Look, you should at least make sure the person on the other side is a friend. What if I’d been an enemy?”

“But we’re in the palace. Why would there be enemies here?”

Kouki tilted his head in confusion. Though he’d heard the noise earlier as well, he still seemed to believe the palace was completely safe.

Judging from his bleary eyes, he wasn’t fully awake yet either.

“Well something’s not right, so stay on your guard.” Ryutarou called out from behind Kouki. “Alright, alright. But I think you’re just overthinking things, Shizuku.” Neither of them made any move to get ready.

“Anyway, Shizuku. What was that noise just now? It sounded like something shattering...”

“I’m not sure. I’ll go wake the others up and see if anyone knows anything. I have a bad feeling about this...”

Shizuku turned back to Yuka. Yuka nodded and she and her friends split up to wake the others.

Unsurprisingly, those who were constantly fighting on the front lines were already up and ready. Jugo Nakayama, Kentarou Nomura, Kousuke Endou, Ayako Tsuji, Mao Yoshino, Daisuke Hiyama, Reichi Kondou, Shinji Nakano, and Yoshiki Saitou answered Shizuku’s summons immediately.

The rest of Aiko’s bodyguard squad was out before Shizuku even got to their rooms.

Sadly, the rest of the students weren’t so prepared. Those who hadn’t fought in months were extremely slow to respond, and some

were still asleep. Shizuku had to beat a few of them awake. Others, she had to coax out of their rooms because they'd heard the noise and were too scared to come out.

"I'm sorry for waking you up in the middle of the night, guys. But most of you guys heard that noise, right? It should be safe inside the palace, but I think we should go see what's going on still. It might be dangerous, so let's all go together." Kouki's words breathed life into the students, and those who were still half-asleep finally woke up.

They all nodded nervously, wondering what could possibly have happened while they were sleeping.

Just then, footsteps approached the group from the end of the hallway.

The students all turned around and saw Nia, Shizuku's personal maid, running toward them. The one who'd reprimanded the other students earlier for relying too much on Shizuku.

"Nia!"

"Shizuku-sama..."

Nia's tone was forlorn.

It was surprising to see her so openly depressed. Nia was from a family of knights, and she was normally much more calm and composed, like Shizuku.

Shizuku opened her mouth to ask what was wrong, but before she could say anything, the words spilled from Nia's mouth.

"The barrier's first layer has been destroyed."

"Wh-What!?"

The reason for her unusual solemnity quickly became clear.

"The demons have launched an assault. They have an army outside the gates, and they've already broken the first barrier."

"How did they..."

Nia's report was so shocking that even Shizuku couldn't remain calm.

The other students broke out into an uproar.

All of them had believed the demons would never make it as far as the capital. It lay on the northern tip of the continent. Everyone had assumed the demons would need to conquer all of the other human cities and forts before they could assault the capital.

And even if they did reach the capital, the students had believed the barrier would hold. After all, it hadn't been breached in centuries.

Their shocked reaction was only natural.

"Nia. There's a total of three barriers protecting the capital, right?" Kouki asked with a grim expression.

There were a total of three barriers, with each successive one being smaller and sturdier than the last.

"That is correct, Kouki-sama. The demons destroyed the outermost

layer with a single attack. It's only a matter of time before they break through the rest..." Kouki nodded and considered his options. After a few moments of deliberation, he decided to strike.

"We'll go out and try to buy some time. In the meantime, evacuate all the residents. If we can just hold out long enough for the soldiers and knights to get into formation..." Only a few students looked like they agreed with Kouki's proposal; just the other frontliners and Aiko's guards.

The others looked away, ashamed. They had long since lost the will to fight. Their spirits had been crushed that day in the Great Orcus Labyrinth.

Even if it was just a defensive battle to buy time, they didn't have the confidence to face an entire army.

Kouki realized he couldn't force them and closed his eyes in resignation. *We'll just have to do what we can with the few people we have.* Before he could say as much though, Eri interjected.

"Wait, Kouki-kun. Rather than rushing out without preparation, I think we should find Meld-san and his knights first."

"Eri... But..." Eri turned from Kouki to Nia.

"Nia-san. You said they had an army, but... do you know their exact numbers?"

"I'm not sure, but it looked to be around one hundred thousand strong."

Everyone gulped. This was no small raid. This was a full-scale invasion.

"Kouki-kun. There's no way we can take an army that large on our own. We need to get more people first. We're the strongest resource the humans have, we can't just waste ourselves recklessly. Which is why I'm thinking it would be smarter to find Meld-san first." Though she spoke softly, her words were resolute. She was still a member of the hero party, after all. Moreover, her suggestion was logical.

"Yeah, I agree with Eirin. That's the smart thing to do. I knew those glasses weren't just for show!"

"G-Glasses don't automatically make people smart, Suzu."

"Fufu. I agree with Eri as well. It seems she was the only one thinking rationally among us. What do you say, Kouki?"

Kouki hesitated for a moment, but in the end, he gave in. Like the rest of the party, he trusted Eri's rational judgment.

"You're right. It's especially in times like these that we need to stay calm. Let's link up with Meld-san and his knights first." Nagayama, Hiyyama, and Yuka all agreed with that assessment as well. And thus, the search for Captain Meld began.

First, they headed for the staging area where they figured the knights would be.

In their haste, no one noticed that one among their party was grinning evilly.

There were plenty of soldiers and knights gathered at the training grounds when Kouki and the others arrived. It had been designated as the staging area during emergencies, so that wasn't surprising.

Jose Rancaid, the vice-captain of Heiligh's knights, was explaining the situation to everyone. Most of the soldiers were pale-faced; hearing that the barrier had been broken must have shaken them.

Kouki despaired when he saw how low morale seemed to be among the soldiers. Jose spotted him as he walked into the courtyard, and interrupted his explanation to address him.

"I'm glad you're here. Have you heard what happened?"

"Yeah, Nia told us. Umm, where's Meld-san?"

Kouki looked around the courtyard, trying to spot Meld in the press of bodies.

"The Captain's busy right now. More importantly, come, join me. You're our leader, so you should be standing in the center..." Jose ushered Kouki and the other students to the center of the courtyard.

The students who no longer fought seemed reluctant to join, as they weren't doing anything to help the cause. However, they were unable to resist the tide of soldiers silently pushing them onward, and were jostled along with Kouki.

Shizuku didn't like how silent and emotionless the soldiers and knights looked. Something was off about them. In fact, something was off about this whole situation. The feeling of unease Shizuku had felt since waking up grew stronger. She gripped the hilt of her katana.

"Hey, Shizuku. Is it just me or..."

"It's not just you. Don't let your guard down. Something strange is happening here."

Yuka did her best to stamp down on the mounting feeling of dread. Though Shizuku didn't want to go any deeper into the crowd, she couldn't do anything but get pushed along. Fighting against the crowd was inadvisable.

Something's not right.

The other members of the frontline parties felt it too. No one said it aloud, but they all felt it.

Finally, Kouki and the others were shoved into the center of the courtyard.

Jose continued his speech. Shizuku grew more worried by the second.

"Comrades, the situation is dire. However, there is no need to fear. There is no one who can match us. There is no one who can defeat us. Death will take none of you today. For we have the hero on

our side. Remember men, today is the day we've trained our lives for. Draw your swords, comrades!" As one, the soldiers and knights unsheathed their weapons.

In the midst of it all, someone stammered out, "Wha, whoa." Shizuku and the others turned to the noise. Kousuke had been casually muscled out of his spot next to Jugo. "U-Umm..." Another confused voice. This time, it was Yuka who was separated from the group.

They weren't the only two, either. Before long many other students, mostly those who fought at the front lines or were part of Aiko's guard, had been split up. Each of them was surrounded by a platoon of soldiers and knights. Goosebumps rose on Shizuku's arms. Her instincts screamed at her to get out of here.

"Everyone, run—"

"Behold, this marks the beginning of a new age!"

Before Shizuku could finish her warning, Jose pulled something out of his pocket and raised it high above his head.

At his words, the soldiers all turned as one to him. Confused, the students followed suit.

A second later there was a bright flash.

Whatever Jose had been holding emitted a burst of light as bright as one of Hajime's flash grenades.

Kouki and the others screamed as the light pierced their eyes. They quickly turned away, but they were already blinded.

A second later, there were a number of meaty thuds.

"Agh!?"

"Gah!"

"Gwaaah!?"

They were immediately followed by a series of screams.

Not screams of surprise, like the screams the students had given when the light hit them, but screams of pain. After that, there were a few loud thumps as people fell to the ground.

Amidst the chaos, Shizuku drew her weapon and readied herself.

She just barely managed to block the sword thrust that came for her.

Like the others, she'd been blinded by the light. But thanks to her years of training, months of experience, and excellent senses, she was able to fight back even while unable to see.

Finally her sight began to return, and Shizuku examined her surroundings. What greeted her was a nightmare.

Her classmates had all been stabbed in the back by soldiers, and were lying on the ground.

"Wha..." She'd been prepared for something terrible to happen, but this was beyond her expectations.

What on earth is happening? Why are they doing this? Shizuku's

voice caught in her throat.

The wails of her classmates pierced her ears. The scene in front of her was so shocking that Shizuku's brain shut down.

Don't tell me they're all dead!? However, though Kouki, Ryutarou, Suzu, and Yuka were all lying in pools of their own blood, they were still breathing.

Knowing that her friends still lived brought some small measure of comfort to Shizuku. However, all of the frontliners aside from her were too gravely injured to even move. Cold sweat poured down her back.

Kousuke was the most badly injured out of all of them. Swords were sticking out of not just his back, but his limbs too. He was twitching weakly on the ground, clearly in pain.

Worse, the rest of Shizuku's classmates had been cuffed with mana-sealing shackles.

No one would be able to heal them.

What do I do? What do I do? Shizuku desperately cast her gaze about, looking for a solution. It was then that she noticed something strange.

"Oh my, I guess I should have expected you to come out of that unscathed, Shizuku."

"Huh? What? Wh-Why? What are you—"

There was a single one of Shizuku's classmates who wasn't on the ground in a puddle of their own blood or pinned down by a cluster of soldiers.

And right now, they sounded nothing like their normal self. Shizuku trailed off, stunned. She'd opened her mouth more out of reflex than anything.

A second later, one of the knights charged at her from behind.

"Ngh!?" Despite her shock, Shizuku still managed to dodge out of the way. The one who'd betrayed them looked down at her, exasperated.

"I can't believe you dodged that too... Of course *you'd* be the one to make things difficult."

"Seriously, what are you—" Shizuku was cut off by a storm of steel. All of the soldiers around her attacked at once. Their movements seemed unusually sharp. It was almost as if they'd been powered up.

Shizuku still managed to dodge their attacks somehow. While she was weaving between swords, she heard someone call out to her, and turned around.

"Shizuku, help me!"

"Nia!"

Nia was lying on the ground, a knight straddling her. She was seconds away from being pierced through by his sword.

Shizuku dashed to Nia, ducking through the horde of soldiers using a combination of No Tempo and Supersonic Step. She bashed the knight away with her sheath, sending him flying.

“Nia, you alright?”

“Shizuku-sama...”

Shizuku helped Nia to her feet while warily observing the nearby troops.

Nia hugged Shizuku from behind, seemingly terrified.

Then a second later, she drove a dagger into Shizuku’s back.

“N-Nia? Wh-Why?”

“.....”

Shizuku’s mouth twisted into a pained grimace as she looked down at her friend.

Nia’s eyes were devoid of their usual warmth. She looked expressionlessly up at Shizuku, as if she were an unthinking doll.

It was then that Shizuku finally realized.

Nia hadn’t been acting oddly because the capital’s barrier had been destroyed. Her subdued demeanor and empty eyes were exactly like the knights and soldiers surrounding them.

In other words, she was under the influence of whatever it was that had made them all go crazy.

Unfortunately, Shizuku had come to this realization too late. Nia pinned Shizuku to the ground, twisted her arms behind her back, and shackled her with the same magic-sealing cuffs the soldiers had put on the other students.

“Ahahahaha. I guess even you couldn’t predict she’d stab you, huh? Yeah, see, that’s why I waited until the last minute to put her under my control.” The burning sensation in Shizuku’s back contrasted starkly with the cold ground at her cheek. She realized now that the soldiers acting strange hadn’t been the work of demons, but this student.

The truth stung. Shizuku couldn’t accept it.

No, she didn’t want to accept it. That she’d been betrayed by someone she trusted.

They’d gone through so many crises together. It was inconceivable that she would betray them, but Shizuku couldn’t deny what her eyes showed her.

“What is the meaning of this... Eri!?” Eri, the quiet, thoughtful, kindhearted girl who always put others first, who had fought together with Shizuku for the past few months was in fact— a traitor.

She’d purposely missed everyone’s vitals. So that they could lay there writhing in pain while she gloated. All of the other students gazed at Eri in shock.

Eri’s soldiers made no move to attack them any further. They

stood at attention, lifeless eyes trained on their new master.

Eri walked past the students, examining each in turn. Jugo lay on the ground, twitching. Kousuke had lost so much blood he'd nearly fallen unconscious. Yuka stared wide-eyed at Eri, disbelief written across her face. Eri's footsteps echoing off the cobblestones was the only noise that broke the silence.

She ignored Shizuku's question and stopped before Kouki.

With a maniacal grin, she whipped off her glasses, grabbed the mana-sealing collar her soldiers had put on him, and dragged him to his feet.

"E-Eri... why... Gah... would you..." Though he wasn't as close to Eri as Kaori and Shizuku were, Kouki still considered her a good friend. He couldn't understand why she would betray them. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he forced his question out.

Like before, Eri didn't answer. Her expression didn't look entirely sane.



She leaned over and said in a singsong voice, “Caaaught you, Kouki-kuuun.”

“Mmmf!?”

She pressed her lips against Kouki’s in a passionate kiss.

The sound of their saliva mixing together carried surprisingly far across the empty courtyard. Eri lost herself in the act, savoring the kiss as if she’d been desiring it her whole life.

Stunned, Kouki tried to shake her off but the nearby soldiers pinned him in place. In his weakened state, bereft of his magic, Kouki wasn’t able to overpower them.

After a good amount of time Eri finally pulled away, satisfied. A silver thread of drool connected the two of them. She licked her lips seductively, then suddenly turned to the other students.

They were all looking at her, their expressions a mixture of confusion and pain.

Eri nodded in satisfaction and focused her attention on Shizuku.

“Well, that’s how it is, Shizuku.”

“What do you mean, that’s how it is...? Gah.”

Shizuku glared at Eri, blood leaking from her mouth. Eri shook her head in an exaggerated motion, as if talking to a particularly slow child.

“Still haven’t figured it out? You see, I’ve always wanted Kouki-kun to myself. I just did what it took to make him mine. Make sense now?”

“If you loved Kouki... all you had to do was confess! You didn’t need to go this far...”

Eri’s face went blank for a moment.

But then, her grin returned.

“No, no no no. That wouldn’t work. Kouki-kun’s too kind to give people preferential treatment. Even though you’re all trash, he’s too nice to leave you alone. The only way to make Kouki-kun mine and mine alone was to clean up all the trash lying around him.” Eri shrugged her shoulders, as if her motives were the most obvious thing in the world.

Everyone was still too shocked to get angry at her disparaging remarks. Her entire personality had changed, and Shizuku was honestly doubting whether the girl in front of her was really Eri or not.

“Fufu, I’m so glad we all came to this world. Getting rid of all of you would have been difficult back in Japan. Which is why, of course, I can’t let you guys win this war and go back home. Because Kouki-kun’s going to spend the rest of his days here, with me. Forever.” Suddenly, everything clicked. Shizuku hesitatingly gave voice to her

conjecture.

“Don’t tell me... the reason they broke the barrier so easily... was because...”

“Ahaha? You noticed? Yep, I did that. I smashed the artifact that powered the barrier.” Her guess was spot on. That still didn’t explain how the demon army had reached the capital completely unnoticed, but that was at least one mystery resolved. Eri nodded to a platoon of soldiers who were standing silently next to her, looking like reanimated corpses. Shizuku guessed they were the ones who’d actually carried out the deed.

“I mean, if I killed you guys, there’s no way I’d be able to stay in the kingdom. So I went to the demons and made a deal. I’d let them into the capital and take care of you guys and the soldiers for them, and they’d leave me and Kouki-kun alone.”

“When... did you get the chance to...” Kouki muttered in disbelief.

Eri had been training together with them in the palace all this time. It should have been impossible for a demon to get past the barrier and make contact with Eri. Kouki still half-hoped that this was all some big misunderstanding.

Sadly, even that hope was dashed.

“Remember that woman we fought in the Great Orcus Labyrinth? Before we left, I used necromancy on her. I commanded her to deliver a message to the demons who came to retrieve her body. To be honest, I was scared it wouldn’t work. I needed to get in touch with them without getting killed... so I ended up using necromancy... but I’d wanted to keep those skills hidden so they wouldn’t get suspicious. It turned out alright in the end though.” As she’d said, Eri had reanimated Cattleya’s corpse to deliver a message to the demons who came to retrieve it.

That was also how they’d discovered who’d been the one to kill her.

The demons had sent their reply by reanimating a human’s corpse and sending it to Eri. The barrier was primed only to keep out demons, so the corpse had made it past.

Shizuku, already pale from blood loss, paled even further when she realized the implications of what Eri had said.

Necromancy was an art that utilized the lingering regrets people left behind when they died. Though she’d hidden her abilities, Eri had long since mastered the skills needed to reanimate people. In other words, all of the soldiers in the courtyard, and even Nia were acting strange not because they were under some kind of mental control, but because they were dead.

“Then...that means everyone here is...”

“Only moving because of my necromancy of course. They all died

ages ago. Ahahahaha!”

Shizuku grit her teeth, her mind refusing to accept the answer her reasoning had brought her to.

“Y-You’re lying! There’s no way a dead person should... gah... be able to talk!”

“I’m just that good. I can give my corpses a portion of the personality and memories they had in life, so they’re capable of holding a conversation. It’s an original spell I came up with, Spirit Binding.”

Normally, all necromancy was capable of was reading the last thoughts of the deceased, or creating a corpse by injecting mana into the lingering regrets they left behind. Skilled practitioners could even reanimate corpses, but they would still be mindless.

Their abilities would be inferior to their living versions, and as they were incapable of thought, the corpses would need to be controlled directly by the necromancer. Of course, a simple command like “Attack” didn’t require constant management, so a necromancer could set a horde of corpses on someone without having to micromanage them all.

But something like holding a full conversation like Nia and Jose had been doing should have been impossible with just necromancy.

What Eri had done with her Spirit Binding was rip out her victims’ memories and personalities from their souls, and implant them into their corpses.

In other words, she’d interfered directly with their souls. With just her own skills, Eri had managed to create an inferior version of ancient magic.

That was how overpowered her necromancy abilities were. Despite saying she was bad with necromancy, she had actually been a genius at it. Furthermore, she’d devoted all of her free time to secretly honing her arts. What was truly terrifying was the warped motives that had driven that growth.

In fact, the only reason Eri hadn’t killed all of the students right away was because she could only use her Spirit Binding on one person at a time.

Still, Shizuku found it hard to believe that not a single person noticed she was slowly taking over the army. Eri’s Spirit Binding took time, and the first cases of soldiers acting odd had appeared quite a few days ago.

Suddenly, a terrible thought ran through Shizuku’s mind.

“Don’t tell me... you killed Ai-chan and Lily too...”

“Hm? Nah, I didn’t touch them. I’ve got nothing to do with what happened to them.”

Shizuku breathed a sigh of relief. She’d been worried Eri had

eliminated them because they'd caught on to her plan or something.

Eri saw some of the tension drain out of Shizuku and grinned wickedly.

"It's too early to relax."

"Huh?"

"The girl who took Ai-chan's pretty scary. She knew what I was up to, and she actually decided to cooperate. All of the most important people in the kingdom are under her control, you know? Remember how the king and all his nobles started acting weird recently?"

"Ah!" Shizuku wasn't the only one who gasped. Yuka and the others had spent the past few days searching everywhere for Aiko, only to now discover that she'd been kidnapped.

Thinking back, the king and his ministers certainly had been acting odd.

But no one had suspected that everyone at the top of the kingdom had been brainwashed.

"You know, I was pretty worried when she told me she knew my plans. I thought I might have to end up killing her." Eri wiped an imaginary bead of sweat off her brow. Obviously a lot more must have happened during that encounter, but Eri didn't bother explaining any of it.

"Anyway, it's thanks to her that everything went so smoothly. I was able to speed up my plans by months. Heaven itself is on my side! Everything I do has God's blessing! Don't worry everyone, your deaths won't have been in vain! I'll put your corpses to good use as vanguards in the demon army!" Eri danced under the moonlight, flitting between her former classmates and the reanimated corpses of the soldiers she killed.

Arms spread wide, she spun in a circle at the center of the courtyard. She truly believed that her actions had been ordained by god.

Finally realizing that she was serious, Kouki interrupted her deranged cackling.

"Ngh, stop this, Eri! If you keep going like this, I really..."

"You won't forgive me? Ahaha, I knew you'd say that. You're so kind, Kouki-kun. But you know, that's why all this trash always gravitates to you. So I'm going to have to Spirit Bind you too. That way, you'll only look at me, and only say what I want you to! You'll be mine and mine alone! Aaaah, it's going to be so wonderful!" Eri wrapped her arms around herself and shivered in ecstasy. No one could believe this was the same quiet, thoughtful, bookish girl they all knew.

She had gone crazy. That was the only explanation.

Though Spirit Bind preserved some of the host's original

personality and memories, the necromancer still had full control of them. No sane person would want an undead puppet for a lover.

“This isn’t real...It can’t be! The Eririn I know would...never do something like this! Somebody’s... Gah, somebody’s controlling her! That has to be it! Open your eyes, Eri!” Blood dripped from Suzu’s mouth as she yelled. It hurt to move, even to talk, but Suzu still tried to crawl her way over to her best friend.

Eri turned to Suzu and grinned maniacally. Then she walked over to the student closest to her, Kondou.

Afraid of where this was going, Kondou whimpered in pain and tried to back away. Unfortunately he was still pinned down, with his mana sealed. All he was able to do was squirm in vain.

Eri stopped right in front of him, that same maniacal grin still on her face. He shivered in fear, knowing full well what was coming next. Kouki and the others yelled at Eri to stop.

“S-Sto— Gaaaaaah...” Kondou’s pleas transformed into a garbled scream. A single sword had been plunged into his heart.

This wasn’t a wounding blow. This was fatal.

“Reichi! Gaaah!”

“Damn you, Nakamuraaa! I’ll— Gah!”

Saitou and Nakano yelled out, but the knights pinning them dug their swords in deeper, cutting off their remarks. The students could only watch.

Kondou’s spasms slowly faded, and he eventually grew still. Tough as he was, even he couldn’t survive a stab to the heart.

Eri raised a hand over him and began an incantation no one had heard before. Once she finished her chant, a transparent version of Kondou appeared. His apparition overlapped with his corpse and melted into it.

The knights who had been holding him down stepped back, leaving him free.

Kouki and the others gulped as they watched Kondou’s dead body slowly get to its feet. He had the same lifeless expression that Nia and the other soldiers all had.

“Aaand done. That’s one puppet complete.” Eri’s cheerful voice rang out through the silence. She didn’t sound like someone who’d just killed her classmate and desecrated his corpse.

“E-Eri... Why...” Eri turned back to Suzu and said in the same cheerful voice,

“Thanks, Suzu. It’s because of you that I was able to stay by Kouki-kun’s side. Both here, and in Japan.”

“Huh?”

“You don’t get it? The whole time, it was like there was this unspoken rule that only Kaori and Shizuku could be next to Kouki-

kun. If you tried to approach him, the other girls would band against you.... Since I was powerless back in Japan, somehow getting myself into that circle would have taken forever. That's why I'm so glad you were there. You were so stupid that everyone just laughed at anything you did. So no one would get mad at you even if you did join Kouki's circle. So being known to everyone as your 'best friend' was the best thing that could have happened to me. I could be by Kouki-kun's side, and no one would say anything. And once we got brought to this world, I was even able to be in the same party. You're the most convenient best friend I could ask for! Thank you so much!"

"Ah..." Something inside Suzu broke. Her best friend, the person she'd trusted the most in the world, had just been using her. Everything Suzu knew about Eri was a lie. The light went out of Suzu's eyes, her mind shielding her from the pain of reality by granting her the bliss of unconsciousness.

"Eri, how dare you!" Shizuku screamed at Eri and tried to struggle out of Nia's grip. Nia grabbed Shizuku's hair and slammed her to the ground.

Shizuku continued glaring at Eri through the pain. Being rendered immobile had done nothing to dull her anger.

"Fufu. Oooh, you're mad now. I love it when you make that face. You know, I've actually always hated you. You always got to be by Kouki-kun's side, and yet you always looked like it was a chore to look after him. I hated that arrogant attitude of yours! Which is why I've prepared a very special role for you."

"What... do you mean?"

"Fufu, I wonder what your best friend will think when the first thing you do after your reunion is kill her?"

Shizuku's eyes opened wide as she realized what Eri was trying to do.

"You're going to make me kill Kaori!?" Eri clapped her hands theatrically, as if to say "good job figuring that out." The corners of her lips twitched up into a smile.

Eri wanted to turn Shizuku into a puppet and use her to kill Kaori.

"To be honest, I wouldn't have minded letting her live since Nagumo took her with him... but there's someone here who realllllly wants to make her his puppet. He's been a huge help, so I guess he deserves a reward. Plus, I'm a good girl who keeps her promises!"

"D-Don't fuck with— Gah!?"

Shizuku forced herself to move, even though she knew it would exacerbate her wounds. But before she could even get up, Nia stabbed her again.

"Haha, does it hurt? It does, doesn't it? Don't worry, I'm a nice girl. I'll let you sleep real soon..." Eri slowly walked over to Shizuku. It

appeared she would be next.

The other students all started struggling against their captors. They didn't want to see anyone else end up like poor Kondou.

"Stop! Please, stop this Eri!"

Kouki especially struggled valiantly against his bonds. The five mana-sealing shackles restraining him cracked. In his attempt to activate Overload, he was putting an inordinate amount of strain on his restraints.

However, the undead knights held him in joint locks, keeping him pinned down. As their brains no longer functioned, there were no limiters to keep their muscles in check, and they were actually stronger than their living versions.

Despairing, Kouki could only watch as Eri drew closer to Shizuku.

Shizuku did her best to remain conscious. At the very least, she wanted to face her death head-on. She refused to give Eri the satisfaction of passing out right before she died.

Eri smirked at Shizuku and took a nearby knight's sword. It seemed she wanted to do the honors herself. Sword held high, she gloated one last time.

"Bye, Shizuku. I gotta say, pretending to be friends with you made me want to puke." Shizuku glared at Eri, but her thoughts turned toward her best friend.

She knew there was no way her warning could reach Kaori, but Shizuku still sent off one final message to the girl who was traveling the world with her crush.

I'm sorry, Kaori. But please, don't trust me the next time we meet... Live a long life... and be happy... Silver moonlight glinted off the sword in Eri's hands.

She brought it straight down, like a stake she was trying to drive into the heart of a vampire.

As she watched the point come down, Shizuku prayed.

Please, let my best friend survive this ordeal.

Please let her find happiness.

I'll be dying before you, and I know I might end up hurting you. But still, I'm sure you'll be fine. You have Nagumo with you, after all.

Live happily, together with him. I hope... Time slowed to a crawl, and Shizuku's entire life flash before her eyes. *Looks like that really does happen when you're about to die...* Feeling the end of her life at hand, she awaited the moment when everything would turn black.

"Huh?"

"Wha?"

Both Shizuku and Eri cried out in surprise.

Eri's sword had been stopped by a palm-sized barrier of light.

The two were startled out of their reverie by a voice that shouldn't

have been here. A strained, almost panicked voice.

The voice of the girl Shizuku had just wished happiness on-the voice of her best friend.

“Shizuku-chan!” Ten glowing shields appeared around Shizuku, surrounding her in a glowing dome of protection. Kaori created a few more and sent them flying in front of Nia and Eri. These flashed brightly, and exploded in a supernova of light. Kaori had overloaded the mana in her barriers, causing them burst. It was a makeshift way to turn her defensive skills into offensive ones.

“Ah!?” Eri raised her arms to try and block out the light, but the resulting shockwave and shards of shattered shield that assailed her bowled her over.

Nia, too, was blown away by Kaori’s Barrier Burst. She quickly recovered and moved to restrain Shizuku again, but was stopped by Kaori.

“Divine Shackles!” Chains of light slithered up from the ground and restrained both Nia and Eri.

Still dumbfounded, Shizuku turned toward the sound of Kaori’s voice. There was no way her best friend should have been here, but there she was, standing between the ranks of zombified soldiers.

It wasn’t an illusion. Kaori really was standing there.

Tears of happiness spilled down her cheeks. This time she’d made it in time. Barely, perhaps, but this time she’d protected the people she wanted to protect.

“K-Kaori...”

“Shizuku-chan, just sit tight! I’ll save you!” Kaori saw how injured everyone in the courtyard was and quickly moved to heal them. She started chanting the greatest light recovery spell, Aetherflow.

Their wounds were serious enough that she needed to prioritize healing them over everything else.

“Why are you here!? Why is it you all have to keep getting in my way!?” Face twisted in an insane snarl, Eri ordered her soldiers to attack Kaori. The soldiers rushed at her, intent on stopping her chanting.

Their swords were met by a glowing wall of light. Not a single one managed to reach Kaori.

“What happened to you all!? Why are you acting like this!? Come back to your senses! Eri, what is going on here!?” Liliana had raised a golden dome to protect Kaori while she cast her healing spell.

Liliana stood behind Kaori, trying to make sense of this situation. She couldn’t fathom why her soldiers and knights were attacking the students, nor why Eri seemed to be the one in charge of them. She demanded an answer from Eri, but Eri ignored her.

Though she was a princess, Liliana was also a skilled mage. Skilled

enough that she'd single-handedly been able to protect More's caravan from over forty bandits. Holding back a group of knights, even knights that had been strengthened via zombification, long enough for Kaori to finish her spell was an easy task for someone of her caliber.

Panic colored Eri's face as she realized her plan was starting to crumble.

"Tch. Guess I've got no other choice." Impatient, she looked over to where her classmates lay.

She didn't have time to turn them into her puppets anymore. Her only option was to kill them before Kaori finished her spell.

Before she could make a move, though, one of the knights banging on Liliana's barrier lost his head. His decapitated corpse slumped to the ground.

Standing over the knight's body was none other than Daisuke Hiyama.

"Shirasaki! Princess Liliana! Are you two alright!?"

"Hiyama-san? How are you moving with such terrible wounds!?"

Liliana paled as she saw the condition Hiyama was in. Kaori was too disciplined to stop her chanting, but her eyes opened wide in surprise as she took in Hiyama's wounds.

His shirt was soaked in blood, and there was still more spurting out of the hole in his chest. It was obvious he'd pushed himself to the absolute limit to break free from his bonds.

He staggered and leaned a hand against the barrier to steady himself. Liliana hurriedly opened a Hiyama-sized hole in it to let him into its protection.

Once he was safely inside, he collapsed to the floor.

A second later, Shizuku yelled out a warning.

"Wait! Get away from him!" Blood dripped from her mouth as she shouted. It hurt to talk, but she had to warn them. Eri had mentioned that one of her accomplices wanted Kaori as his own, and Hiyama had been able to escape his bonds when even Kouki hadn't. The connection was obvious. Hiyama had to know Liliana's barrier would hold until Kaori finished her spell. Yet he'd gone to "save" them anyway. There could only be one reason why.

"Kyaaa!?"

"Ah—!"

Sadly, Shizuku's warning was too late.

Hiyama leaped to his feet and shoved Liliana out of the way, breaking her concentration and dissolving the barrier. He then circled behind Kaori and stabbed her through the chest.

"Kaoriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!" Shizuku's devastated yell echoed through the courtyard.

Hiyama buried his face into Kaori's neck. There was a madness in

his eyes. He still had one hand wrapped around the hilt of the sword sticking out of Kaori's chest.

From the very beginning, Hiyama's injuries had been faked. He'd only pretended to have been done in with the other students. In reality, he'd been Eri's insurance against any more of Kouki's heroic bursts of strength.

The moment Kaori had appeared, Hiyama knew she'd heal everyone and ruin their plans. So he'd put on act to lower her guard.

"Hehehehe, Finally! I finally did it! I knew it, I really am better than Nagumo. I am, aren't I, Shira... I mean Kaori? Right? I'm totally better than that loser! Hehehe, Hey Nakamura, hurry up and bring her back. You promised you would." Eri shrugged noncommittally. Then she started walking over to Kaori.

But before she could start casting, Kouki interrupted her.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaah! How dare youuuuuuuuu!" He pushed so hard against his restraints that they all cracked. Watching Kaori get stabbed before his eyes had caused him to go berserk.

The cracks in his restraints grew larger, and the knights holding him down looked like they were struggling. His strength was immense. Unfortunately, it wasn't quite enough to break free.

Hiyama, who'd been watching everything with detachment, suddenly heard whispering next to him. Looking down, he noticed Kaori was still breathing. The wound was fatal, but she wasn't dead yet.

He brought his ear to her lips, trying to make out what she was saying.

"Mother... heaven... embrace... Aether...flow." She'd continued chanting through the pain, and had somehow managed to finish casting her spell.

Even when she was on death's doorstep, she was stubborn to a fault.

Hiyama stared at her in shock.

Kaori knew she only had seconds left to live. And yet, she hadn't spent her final moments crying, or lamenting her fate, or even calling out to the boy she loved. No, she'd used what little time she had left to fight.

The way she saw it, this was the best way she could show her devotion to Hajime. The boy she'd fallen in love with had been someone who never gave up, no matter how tough the foe or how unwinnable the situation. If she truly wanted to call herself a member of his party, the least she could do is keep on fighting until the very end.

And so, she traded her life to cast one last spell. Her indestructible resolve held through, and she managed to chant it to completion.

Ripples of light spread out from Kaori.

They covered the courtyard in seconds, healing anyone who was injured. Swords still stuck inside students were forcibly pushed outward by the healing light. At the same time, the light dulled the movements of the zombified soldiers.

Naturally the light tried to heal Kaori as well. However, unlike the other students, her wound was fatal. Moreover, Hiyama was still sawing his sword back and forth inside of her, and the light wasn't able to repair such grievous damage fast enough. Hiyama was hell-bent on making sure Kaori died.

"Aaaaaaaaah!" Kouki let out a primal roar.

With his wounds healed, he was finally strong enough to shatter his weakened restraints.

A tremendous amount of white mana surrounded his body. Free of his restraints, Kouki was finally able to activate Overload. The ultimate derivative skill of Limit Break, it quintupled his stats.

"I'll... never forgive you monsters!" Eri's knights tried to hold him down, but he grabbed the sword he'd been stabbed with and sliced them all in two. Strengthened or not, they were no match for Kouki at his peak.

Unperturbed by the carnage he'd caused, Kouki held out his right hand, calling for his Holy Sword. Eri's soldiers had taken it when they'd ambushed the students, but it was wrenched out of their grasp and spun through the air toward him.

"Hold him down," Eri commanded in a flat voice, and her soldiers rushed at Kouki.

"Out of my way... Celestial Flash!" He mowed them all down with a single attack.

Kouki still hadn't overcome his aversion to murder. However, right now, he was too angry to care. Furthermore, his opponents were technically already dead. Killing zombies wasn't the same as killing people, and Kouki laid about without hesitation.

In his reckless rampage, he managed to kill a few of the soldiers holding some of the other students down. More by luck than anything else.

Of the ones that had been freed, one ran back into the castle without anyone noticing.

The others, Ryutarou, Atsushi, and Yuka were forced to fight off the soldiers crowding around them. But as always, no one took any notice of Kousuke.

Even when his mana had been sealed, no one had noticed him. But then, his innate talent at going unnoticed wasn't something that required magic to use. So long as they weren't staring directly at him, people would forget he was even there.

“Tamai! Sonobe! Here!” Kousuke grabbed Atsushi’s artifact, a powerful cutlass, and one of Yuka’s artifacts, a set of twelve throwing knives, and threw them at their respective owners. He wanted to get them armed before the soldiers restrained them again.

Even his shout wasn’t enough to get their attention, but when the two of them saw their artifacts show up at their feet, they guessed what must have happened.

“Be careful, Tamai! Don’t cut my hands!”

“How clumsy do you think I am?”

Yuka held her hands out, and Atsushi cut through her shackles with impeccable precision. His job was Cutlassier, so it stood to reason he knew how to use his weapon. Freed and able to use magic, Yuka instantly activated the abilities of her own artifact. So long as she had one of the knives in her hand, she could call back all the others.

The knives themselves weren’t that strong, but the fact that she could always call them back made them quite powerful.

Yuka’s remaining knives flew toward her, cutting through the soldiers holding Taeko and Nana along the way.

In the meantime, Atsushi succeeded in freeing Akito and Noboru.

“Suzu! Put up a barrier for us! Protect the guys who aren’t fighting!” Ryutarou barked out orders while Atsushi, Yuka, and Kousuke ran around freeing everyone they could.

He knew the stay-home group would be too scared to fight even after being freed, so he asked Suzu to guard them. Eri had realized turning everyone into puppets would be impossible now, so she changed tactics. Her soldiers now struck to kill, not to immobilize.

Hence why Ryutarou had hoped Suzu could save all of the other students now that she was free, but when he glanced back, he saw her still sitting there.

“Huh?” Her eyes were glazed over, and it looked as if she didn’t even register the battle going on around her.

“Suzu!”

“Ah S-Sorry!”

Her usual cheeriness was nowhere to be seen. It was obvious from her expression that she was in no state to fight.

Cursing Eri for doing something so horrible to Suzu, Ryutarou scooped her up and went to defend the remaining students himself.

Most of the rearguard still had their shackles on, and were unable to assist.

Jugo, Atsushi, and the others knew that so they formed a protective circle around the remaining students. Ryutarou muscled his way into the ring and began punching people.

This was a fight to protect his comrades, it was natural that he participated.

But no matter how many zombie soldiers the group defeated, more rose to take their place. *Just how many damn people did she zombiefy!?*

“Fucking hell!”

“Calm down, Sakagami!”

Jugo tried to keep Ryutarou in check. The two of them were serving as the students’ living shield. It was only because they were taking the brunt of the enemies’ blows that Yuka and the others were able to attack.

Without Ryutarou, the students would be overwhelmed in minutes.

Jugo knew how much Kaori’s death pained Ryutarou, but if he leapt into the fray, everything would be over.

“GET OUT OF MY WAY! KAORIIIIIIII!” Tears in her eyes, Shizuku tried to claw her way over to Kaori. But the waves of zombie knights held her back. She was too distraught to fight effectively, and her blows missed their mark more often than not. Seeing how badly she was fighting only made her more distressed, which in turn dulled her blade even more.

It was then that Kouki used brute force to punch a hole in the wall of soldiers and create an opening.

Pure hatred oozed from him as he charged forward, wrapped in an aura of blazing white light.

“Eri, Hiymaaaaaa!”

“That’s as far as you go, Kouki-kun.” Eri used her final trump card. She knew Kouki well enough to have all of his weaknesses charted.

A single soldier stepped in between Eri and Kouki.

As she’d expected, Kouki lowered his sword.

In a trembling voice, Kouki called out.

“No... Not you too, Meld-san...” Standing in front of him was none other than the captain of the kingdom’s knights, Meld Loggins. He was why Kouki had stayed his sword.

“Kouki... why are you pointing your sword at me... I didn’t teach you to fight so you could kill humans...”

“Huh? Meld-san... I’m not...”

“Kouki, don’t listen to him! Meld-san’s already dead!” Shizuku’s words shocked Kouki out of his reverie.

But by the time he’d returned to his senses, Meld’s sword was bearing down on him.

Kouki hurriedly raised his own sword to block. Meld’s blow was so powerful that the ground beneath Kouki cracked from the force of it. Like the others, Meld’s internal limiter had been removed, allowing him to exert the full strength of his muscles.

“Meld-san... I’m sorry about this!” Face twisted in anguish, Kouki nevertheless fired off a series of lightning-quick slashes.

But even in death, Meld’s swordplay was impeccable. Though Kouki was using Overload, Meld was still barely able to keep up. Part of that was because Kouki was still hesitating a little to kill Meld. He knew in his head that Meld was already dead, but that didn’t make it any easier to fight him.

But even with that handicap, Meld had no chance against Kouki as he was now. After a furious flurry of blows, Meld’s sword was knocked out of his hand.

Kouki stepped in and swung wildly at Meld’s neck.

But just before he parted Meld’s head from its shoulders—

“Please don’t kill me... Kouki.”

“Ah!?” Kouki’s sword stopped inches from Meld’s neck. *Could it be that Captain Meld hasn’t been killed, and he really is just being controlled? Can we still save him?*

This was Kouki’s greatest weakness. He was easily swayed by his emotions, and couldn’t commit. He should have made a decision and stuck with it. Either save Meld or kill him. However, Kouki couldn’t be that decisive. He continually restructured his priorities based on whatever new information became available. Though he never doubted his own righteousness, and always interpreted things in a manner convenient for him, it still meant that when it came down to the wire, he stumbled.

Meld kicked a nearby sword up into his hand and once again struck at Kouki. This time, however, it was Kouki who was being pushed back.

“Ah!? Gah! Wh-What the? I suddenly feel weak—” The strength drained from Kouki’s limbs, and he sunk to his knees. It wasn’t because Overload’s time limit was up. There were still a few minutes until that happened. Besides, the recoil from Overload didn’t leave Kouki vomiting blood. He retched, another mouthful of blood splattering the ground.

“Phew. Looks like it’s finally working. I used a potent poison but... I guess I should have expected you’d be able to resist it, Kouki-kun. If I hadn’t kept the captain handy, I might really have lost,” Eri said nonchalantly. Kouki hugged himself and looked questioningly up at her.

Eri ran a finger across her lips and smiled sweetly.

“Hehe. If the prince’s kiss is what wakes the princess up, then it’s the princess’ kiss that puts the prince to sleep and makes him hers... permanently. Don’t worry, the poison’s not lethal. You’ll just be paralyzed for a little bit! Fear not, I’ll be sure to kill you with my own two hands, Kouki-kun!”

“So that kiss back then was... Gah.”

Indeed, when Eri had kissed him after springing her ambush, she'd fed him poison.

She'd taken the antidote beforehand, which was why she hadn't been affected. Nobody would have expected her to poison someone with a kiss, especially not the boy she ostensibly loved.

“Eri, you really are... Gah.” Kouki was once again reminded of the fact that Eri's nice girl act had been just that, an act.

The poison finished paralyzing his limbs, and Kouki slumped to the ground. He lay there, spasming uncontrollably. No matter how hard he struggled, he couldn't reassert control over his limbs.

“Just wait right there, Kouki-kun~” Eri smiled in satisfaction as she confirmed that Kouki was fully immobilized. She then turned on her heel and headed over to Kaori.

In another few minutes, Kaori's soul would leave her body and Eri would no longer be able to bind it.

Hiyama urged Eri on, his face a ghastly mask. Not only had they killed Kaori, they were going to desecrate her corpse. The thought made Shizuku's blood boil. She desperately fought her way through the press of soldiers, trying to reach her best friend.

But as Shizuku watched, Eri raised her hand over Kaori's head. Then, she started to chant.

Ryutarou, Jugo, Yuka, Atsushi, Kousuke, Kentarou, and even the students who had been cowering until now all rose and up and charged, their anger boiling over the tipping point. But they couldn't overcome the wall of bodies, and were forced to watch as Eri continued her chant.

In a few more seconds, Kaori would be nothing more than an undead puppet who listened to Hiyama's every command.

She wouldn't even be granted the dignity of death.

Both Eri and Hiyama sneered as they watched the students' futile attempts to stop them. In the midst of the despairing shouts and anguished screams, a single voice rang out.

“What the fuck do you think you're doing?” Hajime Nagumo had finally arrived.

Time seemed to stand still. Everyone stopped what they were doing and turned toward him. He was emanating an aura of intimidation so powerful it was palpable.

As Eri's zombie soldiers had no emotions, his aura didn't affect them. But Eri, their controller, did. Her instinctive fear transmitted itself to her soldiers, and they crowded around her instead of continuing their assault on the students.

Hajime took in the situation, ignoring the hundreds of stares directed his way.

A contingent of soldiers and knights were attacking the students. The students had clumped in a corner and were fending them off. Kouki was lying in a pool of his own blood, with Meld standing over him. Shizuku was on her knees, the katana he'd given her still in her hands. Eri and Hiyama looked like they'd seen a ghost. And lying in Hiyama's arms was Kaori, a sword still sticking out of her chest. Her heart wasn't beating, which meant—

“Hiii!” Someone screamed.

In that moment, Hajime looked like a demon from hell. His expression was so terrifying that everyone's blood ran cold. It felt as though he had all of their hearts in a vice, and a snap of his finger would kill the lot of them. They stood rooted to the spot, their bodies frozen as they imagined what horrific death awaited them.

Then, a second later, Hajime vanished. He moved faster than human eyes could follow, and with a thunderous boom, appeared next to Kaori.

Hiyama was sent flying across the courtyard and smashed right through the wall at the far end.

Hajime had held back a little to avoid hurting Kaori any further, which was the only reason he hadn't died instantly.

“Gah... *Cough*... Ngh.” Half-buried in the wall, Hiyama spasmed and coughed out a lungful of blood. His internal organs had been pulverized, and most of the bones in his upper body shattered, but he still lived.

The pain was so great that it knocked him unconscious, and then woke him up again. He groaned continually, the pain rendering him unable to move.

Hajime didn't even spare Hiyama a glance. He lifted Kaori into his arms, and gently brushed the hair off her face.

Then, in a loud voice, he called out orders to his comrades.

“Tio! Take care of her!”

“V-Very well. Leave it to me!”

“Sh-Shirasaki-san!”

Hajime's words broke Tio out of her shocked stupor, and she hurried to take Kaori from him. Aiko ran over as well, her face pale.

Tio quickly began chanting the strongest healing spell she knew.

“Ahaha, give it up! She's already dead. I never thought you guys would show up here... Well, I guess I should have expected it since Kaori was here and all... Looks like Hiyama's outlived his usefulness, so how about I give Kaori to you instead? If you promise not to fight me, I'll use my magic to bring her back. She won't really come back to life, but at least she'll still look pretty. It's better than letting her rot, I imagine. What do you say?” Though Eri was smiling, beads of cold sweat dripped down her forehead. *Why'd this monster have to show up*

and ruin all my plans!? Her thoughts showed clearly on her face.

Monitoring Aiko's reactions, Hajime stood up and turned to face Eri.

Eri knew she didn't stand a ghost of a chance against Hajime. Her only hope of making it out of this situation alive was convincing him that she could be of use to him. Still, the glare in Hajime's eyes was as murderous as ever. He slowly walked over to Eri, his face a terrifying mask of rage.

"Wait, hold on. Let's talk things through, Nagumo. Look at all these soldiers. They look like they're practically alive, don't they? It's unfortunate that Kaori died, but I can at least make her like them. Besides, this way you'll be able to do whatever you want with her. So if you don't want her to rot away, you need to keep me ali—" Eri backed away, desperately trying to persuade Hajime.

At the same time, someone snuck up behind Hajime. He moved far faster than any of Eri's other puppet soldiers, and thrust his spear at Hajime's unguarded back.

Eri had finished transforming poor Kondou into her puppet, and was now using him to attack Hajime.

Though he'd been zombified, his overpowered strength still remained. Kondou's job was Dragoon, and he had been a master of the spear. A spiral of wind surrounded Kondou's weapon as it shot straight into Hajime's heart.

"Ahaha, you shouldn't have let your guard down~ If you let your anger control you, you'll—" Eri began to gloat, but stopped almost immediately as she saw that Hajime was still walking. He didn't seem fazed at all by the attack. That was because it hadn't even hit him.

Had she been standing behind him, Eri would have noticed a quarter-sized bundle of crimson mana holding Kondou's spear back. He'd used Diamond Skin and Focused Strengthening to block the blow.

Hajime pointed his left elbow behind him and, without preamble, fired a shotgun blast.

There was a tremendous bang and a barrage of bullets slammed into Kondou's face, pulverizing his skull. Then, a series of wet plops as pieces of his head fell to the ground.

"Tch... Get him." Eri frowned and ordered the rest of her soldiers, along with Meld, to attack Hajime.

Though Hajime wasn't as attached to Meld as Kouki was, he was still one of the few adults in this world who Hajime had trusted. Enough that he'd been willing to use one of his precious Ambrosia vials to save him back in the Great Orcus Labyrinth.

Eri was hoping that would cause Hajime to hesitate, like Kouki had. Meld rushed in while the other soldiers held back. They were

looking for an opportunity to strike.

He swung his sword at Hajime with all of his considerable might. Any normal sword or shield would have been sliced in half by the force of the blow, but Hajime simply stopped it with just the tip of his prosthetic finger.

“So she got you too, huh? What a shame.” Kouki and the others watched, dumbfounded, as Hajime pushed Meld’s sword back. He heaved a despondent sigh as he looked at what Meld had become.

And then, a miracle occurred.

“Ah... P-Please...” Eri wasn’t controlling him this time. Even if it seemed like it to the others, Hajime knew those were the words of the real Meld Loggins.

There was only one response he could give to a request like that.

“Leave it to me.”

Bang! Another barrage of shotgun shells flew out of Hajime’s arm, and shredded Meld’s corpse. Blood-red flowers blossomed all over his body. At the moment of impact, Hajime could have sworn Meld smiled. Unfortunately though, he didn’t have any time to dwell on it.

He pulled out his gatling gun, Metzelei, from his Treasure Trove. Red sparks ran down its length, and its barrel began to spin.

Atsushi and Yuka knew what was coming next, and their faces twisted into a striking impression of The Scream.

“Everyone, get down!”

“Oh shit, out of the waaaaaaaay!”

Ryutarou and Jugo pushed down anyone who was too slow to react. And a second later, Metzelei began spitting out death at twelve thousand rounds a minute.

This was the weapon that had turned a Liberator’s army of golems into a pile of rubble, obliterated an army of monsters, and even overwhelmed an apostle of god’s deadly feather barrage. Human bodies wouldn’t even last a second against it.

The railgun-accelerated bullets ripped right through Eri’s soldiers and turned the walls of the courtyard into swiss cheese. Hajime rotated in place, mowing down everyone around him.

Bloody mist filled the air, and chunks of flesh rained down.

Soldiers died by the dozen, their strength and training meaningless in the face of such destructive might.

Finally, Metzelei’s rampage stopped, and silence filled the courtyard. After a few seconds, the sound of footsteps could be heard again.

The students were all too stunned to move. They could only watch as Hajime continued his relentless march toward Eri.

Like the others, she’d dropped to the ground and waited for the storm of death to pass her by. When she opened her eyes, she was

greeted by the sight of Hajime's boots.

Timidly, she raised her head. Hajime stared coldly down at her. His gaze made her feel small, as if she were nothing more than a pebble on the roadside.

Metzelei wasn't in his hands anymore. He faced her down bare-handed.

Eri couldn't say anything. She stared dumbly at Hajime, the silence stretching on until he finally opened his mouth.

"So?"

"Ah..."

Hajime didn't know the details of why Eri did what she did. However, her actions had made the fact that she was his enemy clear.

Had she been any normal enemy, he would have killed her and been done with it, but Eri had hurt someone important to him. That was the one thing he would never forgive. Just killing her wasn't enough. He wanted Eri to taste despair first. He'd asked her that question because he'd wanted to prove to her that there was nothing she could do.

Eri realized that as well, and she grit her teeth in frustration. A trickle of blood dripped from her lip. A few moments ago, she'd been in complete control of the situation. Everyone had been dancing to her tune, and her dominance was but a simple fact. Somehow, Hajime had come in and destroyed all of that in seconds. The unfairness of it all infuriated Eri. She glared daggers at Hajime, her hatred overpowering her fear.

"You little—" Before Eri could finish her insult, she felt a cold, metallic object press into her forehead.

Hajime had drawn Donner so fast that she hadn't even seen it.

"I don't care what drove you to this, I don't care what your motives are, and I don't have the time to listen to you explain them. If that's all you've got to say... then die." Hajime wrapped his finger around the trigger. Eri could tell from his eyes. He wouldn't hesitate to kill one of his classmates, nor did he care that doing so would mean he'd never be able to make Kaori his puppet.

I'm going to die. That single thought filled her mind.

Fortunately for her, it appeared Eri had the devil's luck.

A fireball came out of nowhere before Hajime could fire the trigger. It burned white-hot, and had quite a bit of force behind it. However, it wasn't nearly powerful enough to hurt Hajime. He just shot a bullet right through the spell's core, and the fireball dispersed.

"Nagumoooooooooooooooo!" Hiyama burst out from behind the fireball, charging straight for Hajime. He was covered in wounds, and didn't even seem capable of proper speech anymore, but had somehow found the strength to fight.

He had a sword in his hand, though his right shoulder was shattered and dangling limply. Blood dripped from his mouth as he ran.

Fact of the matter was, he looked utterly pathetic.

“Shut up!” Annoyed, Hajime kicked Hiyama in the chin. He rose a few inches into the air, but didn’t go flying. The force of the impact had been transferred entirely into his body, which was why he didn’t move much.

Hajime then raised his leg up high, and brought it down in an earth-shattering axe kick.

His heel slammed into Hiyama’s skull, and smashed it straight into the ground. The floor cracked as Hiyama’s head hit it, and a fountain of blood spurted from his forehead. Then, his eyes rolled back into his head and he fell unconscious instantly.

It was obvious he was at death’s door, but Hajime didn’t stop beating on him.

As Hiyama’s head bounced back up, Hajime kicked it again, sending him flying into the air. He held back so that Hiyama would regain consciousness instead of die.

As Hiyama fell back down, Hajime grabbed the back of his collar and held him up. Hiyama struggled against Hajime’s grip, but his weak thrashing achieved little. Hajime was beyond the realm of mortal strength, and Hiyama had lost too much blood to put any power behind his kicks and punches.

“Ish all your fault! If it washn’t for you, Kaori would’ve been mine!” He vented all of his deep-seated resentment. Hajime was honestly a little impressed that anyone could sink so low. Hiyama’s unabashed depravity would have made normal people sick to their stomach.

Hajime, however, didn’t even bother saying anything. His face was an expressionless mask. To him, Hiyama wasn’t even worth wasting his emotions on.

“It wouldn’t have mattered if I was here or not. Hell would have to freeze over before you’d manage to do anything worthwhile with your miserable existence.”

“Ish all your fault!”

“Don’t pin the blame on other people. You’re the one who decided to stoop to this level. Both here and in Japan, you’ve always been the loser. You didn’t lose to other people. You’ve lost to yourself. You never once tried to take responsibility for anything. All you ever did was sit on the sidelines and insult everyone else, when the real loser was always you.”

“I’ll kill you! No matter what ish takesh, I swear I’ll kill you!” Hiyama had gone completely insane.

Hajime gave Hiyama one last pitiful glare before looking off into the distance. He had just noticed that the demon army had made it all the way to the castle gates.

He threw Hiyama into the air once more and punched him with his artificial arm as he came down. The force of the blow made Hiyama start spinning like a top.

“Good luck surviving out there. Knowing you, you probably won’t make it.” Hajime spun around and slammed a roundhouse kick into Hiyama’s chest.

There was a rippling shockwave and a sickening crunch as Hajime’s foot connected, and Hiyama was sent flying out of the courtyard, right into the path of the oncoming demons...

Hajime had unconsciously held back just enough to keep Hiyama alive.

He was making Hiyama’s death a much more painful ordeal not because Hiyama was the one who’d knocked him into the abyss all those months ago, but because he’d tried to kill Kaori.

Hajime himself was only dimly aware that was the reason, but it was clear from his actions that deep down he cared that much for Kaori. Hence why he’d kicked Hiyama into the horde of monsters and demons to let them rip him apart.

Unfortunately, because he’d taken his time with Hiyama, he’d run out of time to kill Eri.

Not because she’d managed to run away. But because a new pest had appeared. Hajime looked up to see a beam of aurora-colored light headed straight for him.

“Tch.” He clicked his tongue, leaped to the side, and fired Donner at the light. Three streaks of red light shot through the deadly beam, like dragons scaling a waterfall.

A second later the beam’s trajectory suddenly changed, and it headed for Kouki. Eri hurriedly pulled him clear before it could vaporize him.

Eri wanted him for a puppet, so she couldn’t let him get turned to ash.

As the light dissipated, Freid descended into the courtyard on his white dragon.

“Stay right there, boy. If you try anything funny, I’ll kill your precious comrades.” Freid appeared to be under the misconception that Hajime was fighting for the sake of the kingdom.

Looking around, Hajime saw that they were surrounded by a sizable army of monsters. Freid had used his specialty, teleportation magic, to bring them here.

Freid knew he wouldn’t be able to beat Hajime in a head-on duel, so he’d tried to take the students hostage. Though Hajime didn’t know

it, this was Freid's last resort. Yue's spell had left him gravely injured, and he was in no condition to fight.

The white raven on his shoulder was healing him, but it would still be some time before he was fully recovered.

Just then, Tio called out to Hajime.

"Master! I have stabilized her for now! But restoring her will take time. If possible, I would like Yue's assistance for this. She will not last long like this!" Hajime looked over his shoulder and nodded.

His classmates looked at him in confusion, not comprehending what he was trying to do.

Freid, however, looked over at Tio in surprise. He was capable of using ancient magic too, so he'd guessed what she was attempting.

"I see, so you've discovered yet another ancient magic. Could this be the magic of the Divine Mountain? I would very much like to know its location. If you refuse to tell me, I'll— Ah!?" Hajime interrupted Freid's pathetic attempts at intimidating him with a bullet from Donner.

One of the turtles next to Freid put up a barrier that just barely managed to block the shot.

Freid narrowed his eyes grimly and ordered his monsters to cluster around him.

"What do you think you're doing? Do you not care about the lives of your countrymen? The more you resist, the more the people of the capital will suffer. Or are you just too stupid to understand the position you're in? I have over a hundred thousand monsters stationed on the outer wall, and another million waiting in reserve. You may be strong, but can you protect this city from such a large force?" Hajime glared coldly at Freid for a few seconds before shifting his gaze to the massive army waiting near the outskirts of the capital.

He then silently pulled out a fist-sized spirit stone from his Treasure Trove. He poured mana into it, and it glowed with a dazzling light. Far brighter than his bracelets did when he was manipulating his Cross Bits.

"Tch, what are you planning!?"

"Shut up and watch."

Freid had a terrible premonition. He ordered his dragon to fire another aurora at Hajime.

However, Hajime kept Freid and his dragon at bay with Donner. A few seconds later, Hajime finished his preparations.

Divine wrath descended from the heavens. A massive pillar of light shot down from the sky, obliterating all in its path.

It eradicated everything it touched, regardless of age, race, strength, or affiliation. The sky lit up, and for a few moments it looked like it was noon.

Kweeeeeeeeeeeee! The pillar of light was a good fifteen meters in diameter, and it scorched the very air as it passed. Anything that came into the light's domain, whether it be monster or demon, was vaporized instantly. Its heat was so great that even things not directly in the light's path melted.

Hajime poured more mana into the spirit stone, and the pillar began to move, swallowing up the monsters and demons trying to flee.

Death came for them all. Inescapable, inexorable death. Unless they could teleport like Freid, no creature could outrun the speed of Hajime's laser.

Monsters and demons surged into the capital, desperately trying to find shelter from that beam of destruction.

The light zigzagged a path around the plains outside the city and dispersed as it reached the wall.

White smoke from the blackened earth hung around the city. Deep furrows had been dug into the ground wherever the light had passed. Hajime's attack had scarred the earth.

The few demons who'd managed to escape into the capital collapsed in a stunned heap. In the span of a few seconds, they'd lost almost their entire army.

Freid, Eri, Shizuku, and the other students were just as shocked. They stared at Hajime in amazement.

"You're the moron here. Did I ever say I was fighting for the kingdom? Or that these guys were my comrades? Stop jumping to conclusions. If you really want to carry on your pointless war, be my guest. Just know that if you get in my way, I'll wipe you off the face of the earth. Well, I don't have time to kill all million of your stupid monsters, so I'll let you go this time. Hurry up and get out of here. You're the one in charge, right? Order your army to retreat." Rage bubbled up within Freid. Hajime had just wiped out most of his comrades, and now he was taking this arrogant attitude with him?

But he didn't want to risk losing the rest of his army. Sure, he could open portals to teleport them elsewhere, but as long as he didn't understand the principle behind Hajime's attack, there was guarantee they'd be safe. The last thing he wanted was to get hit by another one of those.

In all honesty, Hajime didn't want to let Freid go. But right now his number one priority was saving Kaori. If they took too long, she'd be beyond even their powers to bring back. Worse, this would be their first time using Spirit Magic. They'd have to pull everything off without even a trial run to experiment with how this magic worked.

But most of all, Hajime couldn't fire that laser again. It had been a prototype weapon, and one shot had broken it. Hajime could take on a million monsters even without it, but it would take up far too much

time. Killing Freid here would turn his army into a disorganized mob. And right now, that was the last thing he wanted.

Freid clenched his fists so tightly that his hands started bleeding. No matter how frustrated he was though, he couldn't afford to waste his brethren's lives needlessly. He opened a portal and glared at Hajime.

"I swear I'll make you pay for this. I swear it by my god! You'll meet your end at my hands!" Freid spat, his words dripping with hate. He turned on his heel and beckoned for Eri to follow.

For a moment Eri thought of taking Kouki with her. But then she caught sight of Hajime's bone-chilling stare and thought better of it. Cold sweat pouring down her forehead, she hurried over to Freid.

Before she walked through the portal though, she shot one last crazed look at Kouki. Despite the poison's strength, Kouki was still conscious, and that look sent shivers down his spine.

Eri didn't say anything, but it was clear from her gaze that she would stop at nothing to make Kouki hers. This was her declaration of war.

Eri and Freid passed through the portal, and a second later three balls of light burst high in the sky. That was likely the signal for retreat.

Yue and Shea arrived just as the army began its retreat.

"Mmm. Hajime, What happened to that ugly demon?"

"Hajime-san! Where'd that piece of trash cretin go!?"

It looked like they'd come here to beat up Freid. They didn't bother asking about that pillar of light because they knew Hajime had been the cause of it.

Hajime didn't answer; right now there was a far more pressing concern that needed their attention.

He explained what had happened to Kaori. Shocked, the two of them looked over at her corpse. When they saw Hajime's grim expression though, they quickly composed themselves.

In an almost pleading tone, Hajime begged Yue to save her.

"Okay, leave it to me," she replied instantly. Though she didn't fully understand the situation still, she knew what took priority here.

The party all headed over to Tio. Hajime gently took Kaori from her and began walking out of the courtyard.

Before he could leave, Shizuku staggered over and called out to him.

"Nagumo-kun! Kaori's... She's... What should I do?" Shizuku looked far more ragged than Hajime had ever seen her. She was on the verge of breaking down.

The earlier battle had kept her from dwelling on Kaori's death for too long, but now that the immediate threat had vanished, the reality

of what had happened crashed into her.

When he saw Shizuku's expression, Hajime hesitated. After a moment's deliberation, he shook his head.

"Shea, take care of Kaori. Tio, show everyone where the labyrinth is. I'll be there soon."

"Kaori-san... I promise we'll keep her safe."

"Understood. Shea, Tio, we're heading for the summit. Follow me."

Shea took Kaori from Hajime's arms and held her tight.

The three of them flew off into the distance, using all of their significant abilities to reach the mountain as fast as possible.

Everything happened so fast that no one knew how to react. Hajime walked through the crowd of silent students and knelt in front of Shizuku, who was sitting on the ground.

He cupped her cheeks and raised her face, forcing her to meet his gaze.

"Stay strong, Yaegashi. Trust in us. I promise I'll let you see Kaori again."

"Nagumo-kun..."

A faint glimmer of light returned to Shizuku's empty eyes. Hajime smiled gently and joked, "If you're not there to look after everyone, how're these fools going to manage? Besides, Kaori wouldn't want to see you like this either... right? We all need you. No one else is masochistic enough to take care of these guys."

"Who're you calling a masochist, you dork? Can I... really trust you?"

Hajime's smile faded and he nodded sincerely.

Looking into his eyes, Shizuku could tell he was serious. He would find a way to bring Kaori back, even if he had to wade through hell to do it. Seeing his unwavering determination warmed her heart, if only slightly.

The color returned to her face. She nodded to Hajime with newfound resolve. She would put her faith in him and his comrades.

Relieved that Shizuku no longer looked like she was about to break, Hajime stood up. He pulled a vial out of his Treasure Trove and handed it to her.

"This is..."

"Give it to that other childhood friend of yours. He looks like he's in pretty bad shape."

Shizuku turned back to Kouki with a start, as if she'd only just remembered he was there.

After Eri had left, the tension had drained from him and he'd fallen unconscious. His breathing was shallow, and he really did look weak.

Shizuku remembered how this medicine had instantly healed Meld from near-death. It was obviously extremely valuable and rare.

“Thank you, Nagumo-kun.” Shizuku clutched the vial to her chest, tears in her eyes.

Hajime nodded and turned around.

He dashed off into the sky, chasing after Yue and the others.

Chapter V: The Events of a Single Day

After Hajime left, Shizuku fed Kouki the vial of Ambrosia and he recovered instantly.

Once Liliana regained consciousness, she instantly took command and organized the chaos in the castle. Temporary hospitals were set up for the injured, and people were dispatched to find out what had happened.

It was discovered that Eri had turned close to 500 soldiers into her puppets, and, excepting the few hundred Hajime had riddled with bullet holes, they had all vanished without a trace. Liliana surmised that they'd followed Freid in his retreat and were somewhere in demon territory now.

Her scouts had also discovered magic circles made of mana crystals buried in the nearby hills, which explained how Freid had transported such a massive army without being spotted. Chances were that Eri had made her puppet soldiers draw them in secret.

The king and all of the high-ranking ministers had been assassinated by Eri's soldiers days ago as well. At present, Heiligh's throne was empty.

Until things settled down, Liliana would have to take charge.

After the storm passed, it was likely that the prince, Lundel, would be crowned king. He'd survived the upheaval in the palace and was next in line for the throne.

The most pressing issue now that the demons had left was that the Holy Church hadn't sent any communications down.

No priests or paladins had arrived during the fight, nor had any of them shown themselves in the aftermath of the battle. The people were beginning to grow worried, especially because the pope, Ishtar, hadn't appeared either.

A certain white-haired boy was morbidly curious to find out how the citizens would react when they discovered the main temple had been destroyed, and all of the highest ranking clergy killed.

Rumors were beginning to spread that Lord Ehit had saved the humans by sending down that huge pillar the night of the battle, and most of the residents had only grown more devout since. The irony wasn't lost on Hajime.

He had, however, come up with a countermeasure for assuaging

the people's concerns. Liliana had nearly fainted when he'd sent down the letter detailing his plan. Aiko, too, had buried her head in her hands and groaned when she'd read its contents. They hadn't been able to vent their frustrations at him either, as he hadn't descended from the Divine Mountain.

Naturally, there were a lot of people advocating a search party be sent up the mountain to see what had happened. But everyone in the capital was busy with the reconstruction effort, and no one could be spared to make the eight-thousand meter climb. The lift that went directly to the summit still wasn't working, so that climb would be the only way up the mountain.

Hiyama's remains had been discovered a short distance away from the courtyard.

His body had been half-devoured, making it clear that he'd been eaten by monsters after Hajime had kicked him out of the courtyard. There were traces of a struggle, so it was likely he'd been eaten alive.

His left arm was completely gone. The bloodstains suggested that after he'd lost it he'd tried to crawl to safety, only to be caught and eaten from the feet up. A death so gruesome and painful that no one even wanted to think about it.

The more people searched through the wreckage, the more they came to understand how the demons had taken them so completely by surprise. Five days after the battle, most of the pieces had been put together. Kouki and the others were assisting Liliana in rebuilding the city now that they'd fully recovered from the ordeal. Their thoughts often turned to Hajime, who hadn't reappeared since that day.

Most of the students had seen Hajime in action, so they'd had an inkling of how strong he was. But even they hadn't expected he could call down an all-powerful laser from the sky. They were once again vividly reminded of the power gap between them.

His strength was shocking enough to Kouki and the others, but for the students who had chosen not to fight it was a complete eye-opener.

The others had told the stay-home group of Hajime's strength of course, but now they realized they hadn't truly understood how overwhelming he was.

It wasn't surprising that he and his comrades were a hot topic among the students.

Another common topic of gossip was Shizuku.

She seemed to be doing fine, and completed every task assigned to her. But she'd often stop in the middle of her work and look off into the distance. Everyone knew she was taking Kaori's death hard, but no one knew what they should do to comfort her.

They had all heard what Hajime had said, that he'd bring Kaori

back somehow. But none of them really believed he could revive the dead, so it wasn't much comfort to most of them.

A few of the students worried he might bring her back as an undead doll, like Eri would have. Doing so would only hurt Shizuku more, which was why some of the students, especially Kouki, mistrusted Hajime.

He was also down because not only had he needed to be saved by Hajime twice now, he'd watched Meld die before his eyes. Not only that, the difference in strength between them was obvious now. All of that, combined with the fact that he still believed Hajime had somehow tricked Kaori into leaving him meant he wasn't very fond of Hajime right now. That being said, even Kouki realized he was directing his anger to the wrong person. But he still couldn't help but be resentful of Hajime.

Naturally, he was too dense to have realized his feelings stemmed from simple jealousy. Even if he had, he would have refused to believe it. It was likely he would have just reinterpreted everything to suit his own perspective... but it was also possible realizing it might have made him grow as a person.

Regardless, both Kouki and Shizuku were stuck dealing with their own complicated feelings, and Ryutarou was too much of a musclehead for anyone to consider him reliable.

Normally this would have been where Suzu took charge and kept everyone together, but she was as depressed as Kouki and Shizuku. Everyone could tell her smiles were forced, and that she was still hurting.

Eri's betrayal had hurt her more than anyone. After all, Suzu had thought they'd been best friends for years. Hearing that she'd just been used so that Eri could get closer to Kouki had stung.

As all of the people who could have potentially held them together were busy sorting through their own feelings, it wasn't surprising that a pall had fallen over the regular students.

Hiyama and Kondou's friends had retreated into themselves, and the other students had started growing suspicious of each other. There was no telling who might be a potential traitor, and many stayed holed up in their rooms to avoid contact with each other.

Eri's betrayal had lasting repercussions beyond just the immediate loss of a friend.

Still, none of them gave in completely to despair. Plenty of students threw themselves into the reconstruction effort to avoid thinking too deeply about what had happened, and the efforts of Aiko and Yuka kept them, if not optimistic, at least less depressed.

Aiko was of course as worried about Kaori as anyone else. If she could have, she would have been there with Hajime. But she knew

what they were trying to do, and she knew with Tio and Yue there, Hajime had no need for her.

Which was why she had prioritized taking care of the other students. She was a hard worker by nature, and she had gone to every student, listening to their worries and trying to cheer them up.

And even if they had grown suspicious of each other, the students all trusted Aiko. She was in many ways their salvation.

Yuka and the rest of Aiko's guards were also a rock for many of the students, especially those who'd lost the will to fight. They'd been one of them originally, so they knew how the others felt. Without them, it was possible the non-combatants among the students would have been lost.

Of course, both the students and many people within the palace asked Aiko what had happened up above at the Divine Mountain, but she refused to talk about it.

She knew many people were wondering what had happened to the church, but she also knew now wasn't the time to talk about it.

If people went up the mountain now it would interfere with Hajime's work. Besides, her thoughts grew dark every time she thought about what she'd done.

Her spell might have been more effective than she'd expected, but it didn't change the fact that she'd been prepared to kill back there.

She decided she'd confess all of her sins when Hajime and the others returned.

What she had done was a crime, after all.

Though she acted cheerful, Aiko was actually terrified inside. What would her students think of her once they found out she'd helped Tio blow up the main temple and everyone inside it? She was responsible for the deaths of hundreds.

She'd done it because she was tired of these people treating her precious students as pawns, and she certainly didn't regret it, but murder was murder.

It was possible they wouldn't see her as their teacher anymore. But she was resolved to accept the outcome, whatever it might be.

At the very least, David and the others had survived.

They had used their position as Templar Knights to request an interview with Aiko after she'd first been kidnapped. However, Ishtar had denied their request, so they'd tried looking for her on their own. Tired of the knights snooping around, Ishtar had ordered them back to the capital and placed them on standby. In other words, he'd barred them from the cathedral. Their "standby" orders had actually consisted of being confined to a church prison in the capital, which was why no one had seen them until after the invasion.

No one knew why they hadn't been brainwashed, or turned into

Eri's puppets.

Aiko suspected that they'd been spared because they were also pawns Noint's god wanted to keep alive to play around with, but there was no way to confirm her hunch anymore.

Like most others, David and his knights were helping with the capital's reconstruction in order to avoid thinking too hard about the future.

The only way everyone could keep calm was to ignore their problems by throwing themselves into work. Even the kingdom's remaining knights were currently undergoing a test to see who would serve as each squad's captain.

The new commander of the knights was a woman named Kuzeli Reil. She had originally been part of the Royal Guard, and Liliana's personal bodyguard.

Her vice-commander was a man named Neyto Komold. He'd been promoted from his old post as captain of squad three.

The two of them had organized a test where everyone would fight against Kouki to determine who was fit to serve as the new squad captains. As the battles wound down to a close, Kouki wiped a bead of sweat off his brow.

"Thank you for helping out, Kouki-san." Kouki turned to see Liliana smiling at him.

"It's no big deal, don't worry about it. You've got it way harder than I do. You've barely slept these past few days, Lily. It must be tough." Kouki smiled tiredly, and Liliana let some of her own exhaustion show through.

In truth, neither of them had gotten much sleep recently. Though the reason for their respective insomnia was completely different.

"There's no time for sleep. We have to toll up the casualties, contact their families, repair all the destroyed buildings and homes, track down any missing people, repair the walls and the barrier, send out messages to the rest of the kingdom, restructure the army... It's not an easy job, but someone has to manage all of it. Complaining about it won't make the work go away. Mother's been helping out as well, so it's not that bad. The people who're really suffering are those who lost their homes and their loved ones in the fighting..."

"But you also..."

Liliana's father, the king, had been killed by Eri and transformed into a zombie. But Kouki could tell bringing that up wasn't a good idea, so he trailed off.

Lily guessed what he was about to say and smiled sadly at him. "Really, I'm fine," she said, before changing the topic.

"How's Shizuku doing?"

"Same as before. She's doing her best to act normal, but whenever

she's not doing anything she starts staring at the mountain."

Kouki looked over to Shizuku, who was currently discussing something with Kuzeli.

The two of them were actually quite close, and appeared to be engrossed in a discussion about how to organize the new knight regiments.

Whenever there was a lull in the conversation though, Shizuku's gaze would automatically turn upward, toward the Divine Mountain.

"She's... waiting for them to come back, isn't she?"

"Yeah. To be honest... I don't really trust Nagumo. I'd prefer if Shizuku didn't talk to him again, but..."

Surprised, Liliana turned back to Kouki.

Kouki's brow was furrowed and it was clear his feelings on the matter were complicated. Jealousy, suspicion, fear, pride, gratitude, hate, and impatience all warred within him, resulting in a very difficult to read expression.

Unable to find anything to say to him, Liliana looked up toward the mountain.

The weather was so perfect it was hard to believe the capital had been nearly devastated days before.

It almost felt as if the clear sky was mocking them, and Liliana glared angrily at it.

Just then, she spotted a few black dots in the sky. She squinted, trying to get a better look. Before long, it became clear that these dots were growing larger. Something was falling right toward them. Panicking, she called out to Kouki.

"K-Kouki-san! What's that over there!? It looks like something's falling at us!"

"Hm? What do you... Guys! Be careful! Something's coming from above!"

Kouki followed Liliana's worried gaze, and hurriedly called out a warning as he too saw the black dots descending. It was possible this was some kind of enemy attack.

Shizuku and the others rushed over to where Kouki was, eager to get out of the center of the courtyard. No sooner had they evacuated that the dots landed.

There was a tremendous crash and a huge cloud of dust filled the courtyard. From within it emerged Hajime, Yue, Shea, and Tio.

"Nagumo-kun!" Shizuku rushed over the moment she recognized them.

As Hajime had asked, she'd waited and put her trust in him. After five days, her impatience was understandable.

But when she noticed Kaori wasn't among the group, Shizuku's steps ground to a halt. Her face fell, and the worry she'd shut away

began nagging at her once more.

“Yo, Yaegashi. Glad to see you’re still alive.”

“Nagumo-kun... where’s Kaori? Why isn’t she here?”

Shizuku couldn’t hide the anxiety in her voice. Hajime’s casual tone had reassured her somewhat, but the fact that she didn’t see Kaori anywhere still worried her. What if Hajime hadn’t been able to bring Kaori back?

Hajime looked away awkwardly.

“Oh, uhh, she’ll be here soon. Just, uhh... her appearance is a little different from before... It’s not my fault though. This totally wasn’t my fault, so please don’t get mad at me, okay?”

“Huh? Wait, what do you mean by that? What’s not your fault? You’re making me really worried now, you know that? What did you do to Kaori? Depending on your answer, I may have to cut you down with the sword you gave me...”

Shizuku’s expression grew deadly, and she grabbed the hilt of the black katana at her waist.

Hajime hurriedly tried to placate her, but before he could say anything a scream from above distracted them both.

“Kyaaaaaaaaah! Hajime-kuuuuuuuuun! Catch meeeeeee!” Shizuku looked up and saw a silver-haired girl falling toward them at high speed.

Her outstanding kinetic vision allowed her to get a good look at the girl as she fell. She had beautiful blue eyes to match her silver hair, but her tearful expression ruined the effect of her looks. She flailed around wildly as she fell, as if flapping her arms and legs would somehow slow her descent.

She fell straight toward Hajime, confident that he’d catch her.

But of course, Hajime wasn’t that nice of a guy.

A second before she crashed into him, Hajime jumped out of the way. She looked over in surprise, before slamming into the ground face-first.

Is she dead? The students thought collectively as they stared at Hajime in terror.

Lilliana and Aiko were terrified as well, but for a completely different reason. They’d never forget that face for as long as they lived. The blue-eyed silver-hair girl groaned in pain as the dust around her cleared.

Liliana and Aiko hurriedly yelled out a warning.

“Wh-What are you doing here!?”

“Everyone, get out of here! She’s the woman who kidnapped Aiko-san and helped Eri take over the castle!” The students and knights all grabbed the hilts of their respective weapons.

Shizuku, who had reacted faster than anyone, was already in her

drawing stance. Hatred glimmered in her eyes; she wouldn't forgive anyone who'd had even the slightest involvement in Kaori's death. The moment this newcomer showed an opening, Shizuku would strike.

The beautiful girl, Noint, got to her feet instantly. The fall hadn't damaged her in the slightest.

She shot Hajime a reproachful glare before turning to Shizuku. She spoke to her in a flustered voice, a stark contrast to the emotionless tone she'd possessed when Hajime had fought her.

"Ah, wait, Shizuku-chan! It's me!"

"Huh?" Shizuku stared at her suspiciously. She definitely didn't recognize this girl.

"You're not gonna sound very convincing if you say it like that..." Hajime muttered, but then trailed off when she glared venomously at him.

The two of them seemed too close to be enemies. And though this girl looked and sounded nothing like Kaori, her mannerisms and the way she addressed Shizuku were exactly the same.

Shizuku slowly took her hand off her sword and stared dumbly at Kaori.

"Kao...ri? Is that... really you?" Glad that her best friend still recognized her, Kaori's face lit up with a dazzling smile.

"Yep, it's me, Kaori! Kaori Shirasaki, your best friend. I know I look pretty different now, but... I'm alive!"



“Kaori... Aaaaaah Kaori!”

After a few seconds of silence, the realization that her best friend lived sunk in. Shizuku burst into tears and hugged Kaori. She had no idea what had happened to turn Kaori into this, but it was clear that even if she was in a different body now, she was really, truly alive.

Kaori hugged Shizuku back and whispered softly, “I’m sorry for making you worry. But everything’s okay now.”

“*Sniffle... Sob...* Thank goodness you’re alive!”

The two of them clung to each other, burying their faces in the other’s chest.

All the others present watched on in silence as the two cried their hearts out under the noonday sun.

“So what exactly did you do?” Eyes still red from crying and blushing slightly in embarrassment, Shizuku rounded on Hajime and demanded an explanation.

They had gone from the courtyard to the feasting hall that Kouki and the others usually ate in.

All Hajime had managed to explain to Shizuku was that Kaori’s soul had been transferred to Noint’s body before Liliana had suggested they go somewhere more suitable to talk.

Only the students, Aiko, and Liliana were present to hear this conversation.

“Well... put simply, we used magic to preserve Kaori’s soul and transferred it to Noint’s healed...remains? Corpse? Whatever it’d be classified as.”

“I see. That makes absolutely no sense.”

Shizuku glared at Hajime.

Her gaze seemed to say “Are you really trying to explain this properly?”

Kaori sighed, and seeing that Hajime had no intention of expounding, took it upon herself to explain.

“Umm, so Shizuku-chan. You know how all the magic we use is a degraded version of the magic they had in the age of the gods, right?”

“Yes. I studied up a little on this world. Ancient magic is the stuff that comes up in all the old histories, right? They were able to control the core elements that govern the laws of this world, while the elements we have are all derivatives... Wait. Is that how Nagumo-kun did it? He’s capable of using ancient magic that... can control people’s souls? And that’s how he kept your soul intact even though you’d died? And then after that he transferred it to a new body?”

“Yep! You’re so smart, Shizuku-chan!” Kaori puffed her chest out proudly. Shizuku really was quick on the uptake. Hajime had known

that too, but it was still impressive to see how quickly she connected the dots.

“But then why are you in that body? Was yours damaged beyond repair? I’m sure even regular healing magic should have been able to heal those wounds...”

“Oh, actually we managed to preserve Kaori’s body, and at first we actually put her soul back into it.”

Of the magic they’d obtained so far, Spirit Magic was likely the most broken. With it, one could theoretically attain immortality by transferring their soul every time their body grew old.

Whenever a person died, their soul lingered for a few minutes before dispersing. What Tio had done was use Binding magic to tether Kaori’s soul to this realm and keep it from deteriorating until they’d been able to find a suitable host for it. Had they been any later, Kaori may really have been beyond saving, so it was fortunate that Tio had arrived when she did.

After that, they had used Adhesion magic to tie her soul to her body. Technically, Adhesion magic could tie a soul to anything, whether it be organic or inorganic.

If one tried to attach a soul to an injured or aged body, the subject would just die again, but if the soul was put into a healthy host they would be revived. One could also attach a soul to an inorganic object like Miledi had, and thus avoid the issue of aging entirely.

Naturally, this magic wasn’t so easy to use that one could pull off a perfect transfer on their first try.

Tio, who was an expert with hundreds of years of practice under her belt, had needed assistance from the magic genius Yue to even have a chance at making it work.

And though they had ultimately succeeded, it had taken five days of nonstop casting to get it right.

Fortunately, both Yue and Shea had been able to acquire Spirit magic without any difficulties. Neither of them had ever believed in Ehit, so clearing that condition hadn’t been an issue.

They hadn’t proven that they’d destroyed any servants of the church though, so they’d been forced to go through the actual trial of the labyrinth, which consisted of various attempts to brainwash them into serving Ehit, alter their subconscious, lead them astray with visions, and all manner of misdirection and persuasion. Once they cleared that, they had to fight against illusions of past warriors from the church. Neither of those trials posed much of a problem for either Shea or Yue.

“Then why are you... What happened to your original body? Was there something wrong with it after all?”

“Calm down, Shizuku-chan. I’ll explain everything, don’t worry.”

Kaori pushed Shizuku back into her seat and continued her explanation.

At first, Hajime had fixed Kaori's body with Restoration magic and they had attempted to revive her in her original form.

However, it was Kaori herself who had objected to that.

With Spirit magic, it was possible to converse with people who were just souls using Soul Link, a magic similar to Telepathy.

Kaori, still in her spirit form, had asked Hajime to put her soul into a golem like Miledi had. She was confident he would be able to make one far more powerful than her original body.

Though Kaori had come to terms with her own weakness in the Sunken Ruins of Melusine, that didn't mean she wanted to remain weak.

She had no intention of leaving Hajime's side.

But because of how weak she was, she'd been killed trying to fight alongside him.

It had been humiliating, frustrating, and pathetic. Which was why she'd wanted strength at any cost, even if it meant throwing away her human body.

And once she made her decision, there was no changing her mind. Hajime knew full well just how stubborn she could be. Hajime and the others did try and persuade her not to, but she refused to listen. In the end, Hajime had to give in.

Just as he was about to get to work crafting the strongest golem he could, a flash of inspiration came to him. *Maybe we can use her instead?*

By her, Hajime had of course meant Noint.

Her body wasn't too different from a regular human's, but her strength and abilities were far superior.

It seemed just as likely to work as putting Kaori's soul in a golem was, and it would save Hajime the time of crafting one from scratch.

Hajime had brought Noint's remains back and asked Yue to restore them.

They had then attempted to attach Kaori's soul to Noint's inhuman, Apostle, body. Surprisingly enough, the procedure succeeded.

Unfortunately, the magic crystal that served as Noint's heart no longer supplied her body with an infinite source of mana. Kaori was still able to use the special magic, Disintegration, that Noint had possessed. On top of that, she could wield Noint's twin great swords and use the power of her wings freely.

At the moment, Kaori couldn't even fly properly in Noint's body, but once she got used to using it she'd be every bit as powerful as the original God's Apostle had been. All the experience and skills Noint

had accumulated over the centuries were all stored in her body's muscle memory; Kaori just needed to learn how to tap into it.

She could also control mana directly in her new body, so she was every bit as broken as the rest of Hajime's comrades now.

Her reaction upon examining her new body had been quite a sight to behold. Not in the least because of how strange it had been to watch Noint's body frolic around joyfully. Having someone who'd tried to kill you a few days before smile and hug you was a surreal experience, even for Hajime. Even if it wasn't actually the same person in Noint's body.

In fact, he'd almost ended up punching Kaori on reflex. It was only because Shea had grabbed his wrists that he hadn't.

Yue had then frozen Kaori's original body to preserve it. It was currently resting inside Hajime's Treasure Trove.

She looked like Sleeping Beauty, if Sleeping Beauty had been encased in a block of ice. Yue was confident she could restore Kaori's ruptured cells using restoration magic, so if Kaori ever wanted her original body back, Hajime was relatively certain it could be managed.

"I see. Haaah... You've done a lot of crazy things over your lifetime, Kaori, but this really takes the cake." Shizuku buried her forehead in her hands as Hajime finished his explanation.

She could feel a killer headache coming on. This was even worse than when Kaori had run into the 18+ section of the game store to get one of the eroge Hajime said he'd liked. Back then, when the man at the register had told her she had to be at least 18 to purchase the game, she'd blurted out "I'm getting it for my dad!" That episode had become legendary within that store. It had been so embarrassing Shizuku had practically died then and there.

"Ehehe, I'm sorry I made you worry, Shizuku-chan."

"It's fine... All that matters is that you're still alive..."

Shizuku smiled at Kaori, who still looked a little apologetic. She then turned to Hajime with a serious face and bowed her head.

"Nagumo-kun, Yue-san, Shea-san, Tio-san. Thank you so much for saving my best friend's life. You've done so much for me, and I honestly can't think of any way to repay you, but... at least know that I'll never forget this debt. If there's anything, anything at all that I can do for you, don't hesitate to ask. I'll do it in a heartbeat."

"Uptight as always. Don't worry about it too much. We just saved one of our own."

Shizuku smiled wryly at Hajime's casual reply. He had saved not just Kaori's life, but that of all the other students. This made for the second time he'd saved their lives.

Shizuku knew that he'd probably only done it because helping them had aligned with his goals at the time, and that he really didn't

think anything of it, but his cavalier attitude still irked her. Shizuku pursed her lips and glared at Hajime.

“So you say, but didn’t you also console me and give Kouki that rare medicine of yours?”

“Dealing with Kaori would have been a pain if you’d broken down, Yaegashi, so...”

“Th-That’s a horrible way of putting it, Hajime-kun.”

Hajime met Shizuku’s gaze and continued, “But more importantly... a certain teacher told me that I shouldn’t live my life in such a lonely way. I’m not sure I can always follow that advice, but I figure I can at least try...”

“Nagumo-kun...”

Aiko had been listening quietly to Hajime and Shizuku’s conversation thus far, but at that she turned to him, teary-eyed.

Most of the students were impressed that her words had reached even Hajime, who seemed like he didn’t listen to anyone anymore. They suspected that was what had moved Aiko, but Yue, Shea, Tio, Kaori, the members of Aiko’s personal guard, and Shizuku could tell that there was a slightly different emotion packed within that gaze.

Unable to believe it, Kaori turned to Yue who nodded sharply, confirming her suspicions. She then looked over to Shizuku, who averted her gaze and looked up at the ceiling. Atsushi ground his teeth while Yuka smiled drily and refused to meet anyone’s gaze.

Realizing the atmosphere was starting to grow awkward, Shizuku quickly changed the subject. There was still a mountain of things she wanted to ask, so it wasn’t hard to think of a new topic.

“By the way, Sensei. What was it you wanted to tell us the day you were kidnapped? Is it related to why Nagumo-kun is going around acquiring ancient magic?” Hajime silently turned to Aiko.

“Go on,” his gaze seemed to say. Aiko cleared her throat and began explaining how the gods were crazy, why Hajime was traveling the world looking for ancient magic, and the details of her kidnapping and the subsequent destruction of the Holy Church’s main temple.

The first to speak after she finished her story was Kouki.

“What the hell? So we’ve just been dancing to their god’s tune this whole time? Why didn’t you tell us sooner, then!? You could have said something when you saved us back in Orcus!” Kouki glared at Hajime, who just silently watched the outburst.

Infuriated by Hajime’s attitude, Kouki leaped out of his chair and stalked over to him.

“Say something! Why didn’t you tell us!?”

“Calm down, Kouki!”

Kouki was too angry to listen to Shizuku. Hajime furrowed his brow and heaved a weary sigh. Annoyed, he finally turned to Kouki

and said, "If I'd told you, would you have believed me?"

"What?"

"We're talking about you here. The guy who only believes evidence that fits his worldview. If I'd told you the god everyone else believed in was crazy, and that what you were doing was completely pointless, you definitely wouldn't have believed me. Hell, you'd probably get mad at me instead."

"B-But if you'd explained it enough times, maybe..."

"Moron. Why do I have to go out of my way to make you listen? Just because we're classmates it doesn't mean I have to bend over backwards to help you... If you keep spouting crap like that, you'll end up like Hiyama." The other students averted their gaze, unable to meet Hajime's cold eyes. Only Kouki continued glaring at Hajime. That explanation wasn't good enough for him.

Yue looked disparagingly down at Kouki, but he was too angry to take any notice.

"But if we're going to be fighting the gods together from here on out, then..."

"Wait, wait, wait. When did I ever say I was going to fight the gods? Don't just jump to conclusions, hero (lol). If they come after me, yeah I'll probably kill them. But I have no intention of going looking for them on my own. Once I've cleared all the labyrinths, I'm going home to Japan." Kouki's jaw dropped open.

"Wha, you mean you don't care what happens to the people of this world!? If we don't do something, they'll be toyed around with by the gods forever! How can you just abandon them like that!?"

"I'm not so strong that I can just save everyone by snapping my fingers, dude..."

"Why... Why won't you help!? You're way stronger than I am! You could pull it off somehow, if you really wanted to! If you have power, shouldn't you use it for the sake of justice!?" Kouki screamed. As always, his single-minded adherence to justice reared its head.

But when those words were uttered by someone as indecisive as Kouki, they weren't persuasive in the slightest. At least not to Hajime. He gave Kouki a withering look.

"If I have power, I should use it for justice? It's because you think like that that you always end up messing up when it really matters. Personally, I think power should be wielded with a clear intent. You don't do something because you have the power to. It's because you want to do something that you obtain the power necessary to achieve it. If you really think you're obligated to do things just because you have the strength to, then for you, strength is nothing more than a curse. You lack resolve, Kouki. Anyway, I'm not going to argue with you about the path I've chosen. If you keep pissing me off I'll send you

flying out of here like I did with Hiyama.” Once he’d said his piece, Hajime lost all interest in Kouki.

It was then that Kouki finally realized Hajime didn’t hate his classmates or this world, he really just didn’t have any interest in it whatsoever.

Furthermore, having his biggest weakness thrust before him like that had left him too shaken to argue. He wanted to say that Hajime was wrong, that he had more than enough resolve, but for some reason he couldn’t get the words out.

The rest of Hajime’s classmates had more or less realized that it was too much to hope that Hajime had come back to help them. Naturally the other frontliners and Aiko’s guards already knew that he wasn’t going to rejoin their party. In fact, they were a little terrified of Hajime since they knew they’d really end up like Hiyama if they crossed him.

After all, he hadn’t hesitated to kill Meld, Kondou, and all of the other knights. Sure, they might have already been undead zombies, but normally you’d still have a few reservations about killing people you knew.

Moreover, most of the students who’d chosen to stay in the castle after Hajime’s fall had bullied him at one point or another, so they couldn’t even meet his gaze.

“Is there nothing I can do to convince you to stay? If not permanently, at least until the capital’s defenses are in working order again?” Liliana asked in a pleading voice.

The capital was still reeling from the battle, and though Liliana had made sure all of the teleportation magic circles near the capital had been destroyed, there was no telling when and where the demons would attack from next. Hajime was the only trump card she might have against them. Their general had only retreated five days ago because of Hajime and his comrades’ actions. Their mere presence was enough to deter another invasion.

“Now that we’ve killed one of God’s Apostles, we need to hurry. It took five days just to bring Kaori back. I was planning on leaving tomorrow.”

Liliana’s shoulders slumped. But she couldn’t afford to give up. There was no telling when Freid might next attack. If Hajime wasn’t there to help, humanity would almost certainly lose.

“In that case... that beam of light that destroyed the demon army had come from your artifact, right? Could you perhaps leave that behind to protect the capital? In return, I’ll do anything in my power as princess to aid you in your journey.”

“Oh, you mean the Hyperion? Sorry, can’t do it. Actually, it was just a prototype... and that one shot busted it completely. I’m gonna

need to improve its design before I can use it again.” Hajime’s newest weapon, Hyperion, was effectively a massive laser that focused sunlight. He’d launched it up into the atmosphere before descending from the Divine Mountain.

There were a series of lenses inside it that focused sunlight and funneled it as heat into a partitioned space in his Treasure Trove. Once it had charged up enough heat, Hyperion enchanted the light with gravity magic and fired it out of a focused lens toward the ground.

Hyperion’s greatest strength was that it could be charged even during the night. That was because he’d linked his Treasure Trove to the artificial sun located in Oscar Orcus’ hidden chamber. That artificial sun had been created through a combination of spatial magic, restoration magic, and likely some other ancient magic Hajime had yet to acquire. It was the joint work of multiple Liberators, and from what Hajime had seen, was probably their best work yet.

With his current skills, Hajime knew there was no way he’d be able to duplicate that. Moreover, Hyperion was still in a prototype state. It hadn’t been able to withstand its own heat, and had shattered after one shot.

Hajime had created a few other anti-army weapons, though, so he could have potentially left one of those behind. However, he was reluctant to do so.

“I see...” Liliana’s shoulders slumped once more.

Kaori, Shizuku, and Aiko all glared at Hajime. The three of them knew what he was like. Though he had softened around the edges somewhat, his fundamental stance of not giving a shit about the people of this world hadn’t changed. In fact, he’d only helped out as much as he had because he didn’t want to make Yue and the others unhappy, even indirectly.

Which was why none of the three of them said anything. They didn’t have to; their disapproving glares was all they needed.

Hajime sipped his tea and tried to ignore them, but they didn’t give up. Eventually, he grimaced and gave in.

“Fine, I’ll repair the capital’s barrier before I go.”

“Nagumo-san! Thank you so much!” Hajime ignored Liliana and turned to Kaori and the others. *This good enough for you?* The three of them beamed at him.

Both Yue and Shea were thinking Hajime had gotten rather soft, but neither of them found it a bad thing. They both gave him a knowing smile. *Well, I guess doing a good deed every once in a while isn’t too bad.* Hajime thought, smiling faintly.

“By the way, where do you plan on going next, Nagumo-kun? If you’re going after the ancient magics, then your goal would be

conquering the remaining labyrinths, correct? And since you're heading east... I suppose your current destination would be the sea of trees?"

"Yeah, that's the plan. I was originally gonna pass through Fuhren on my way there, but now I'd have to go out of my way to get there so I think I'll just skip it." An idea suddenly came to Liliana.

"In that case, you would be passing through the empire, would you not?"

"Yeah, I guess so..."

"Would you be willing to take me along, then?"

"Hm? Why?"

"There are many things I need to inform the emperor of. I have dispatched an official envoy already, but I would like to get this information to him as fast as possible. That mobile artifact of yours can take me to the empire far faster than anyone traveling on horseback, can it not? I was thinking of going to the empire in person to deliver my report."

Hajime was taken aback by her boldness. A princess heading into a foreign country alone was a rather dangerous endeavor. *Though now that I think about it, she snuck out of the castle all alone and joined up with a traveling caravan just to find help. I guess I should have seen this coming.*

It wouldn't be any extra work for Hajime to drop her off either, since the empire's capital lay directly in his path. A simple request like that was one Hajime didn't mind granting. Though he made sure to make his intentions clear.

"I don't mind taking you there, but I won't be staying in the capital. Don't expect me to stick around for your talks with the emperor."

"Fufu, I wouldn't dream of imposing. So long as you can take me there, that's good enough."

Liliana chuckled at Hajime's wary attitude. Kouki had remained silent after Hajime had raked him over the coals, but now he butt back into the conversation.

"Then take us too. There's no way we can leave Liliana in the care of a guy who says he doesn't care about this world. We'll be her guards. Also, if you won't do anything to save this world Nagumo, I will! But first, I need strength! I need the same ancient magic you have! If I travel with you, I'll be able to obtain it too, right!?"

"Uhh, I'll just tell you where all the labyrinths are, so just go there yourself. The last thing I want is you following me around." *Stop making these decisions on your own, seriously.* It was pretty brazen of Kouki to beg Hajime for help right after complaining about his methods.

Aiko timidly spoke up, remembering what Hajime had said about the labyrinths earlier.

“But Nagumo-kun, didn’t you say before that if we went into the labyrinths with our current level of skill we’d just be killed?”

“Err, well, you know. Look, if even an incompetent guy like me could do it, I’m sure you guys can. It’ll be fine, really. You just need determination and grit.”

I can’t believe she remembered that. Hajime looked about nervously while saying some rather irresponsible things.

“We won’t be able to do it, will we?” Hajime couldn’t meet her eyes.

As far as he was concerned, offering the rest of his classmates a ride back to Japan once he found a way to transfer between worlds was being helpful enough.

He had absolutely no desire to babysit them as they went around trying to conquer all the labyrinths. It would be nothing more than a waste of time.

Shizuku looked up at Hajime, regret and frustration written all over her face. It was clear their recent defeats had weighed heavily on her.

“Nagumo-kun, please. Just one labyrinth. If we can obtain even a single one of the ancient magics, we’ll have a solid chance at tackling the others ourselves. Won’t you help us with just one?”

“You do realize you guys can’t just leech off me in there, right? You have to prove you contributed enough to clearing the labyrinth or else when the magic circle reads your memories, you’ll be denied.”

“I understand. But leaving the talk of fighting the gods aside for now, all of us want to go home too. We’re more than determined enough to risk our lives fighting down there if that’s what’ll really get us home. So... please. I know you’ve already done so much for us, and I don’t want to ask another favor after saying I’d repay my debt to you, but you’re the only person we can rely on. Won’t you lend us your strength one more time?”

Shizuku trusted Hajime’s assessment. If he thought they didn’t stand a chance as they were, she knew they’d need his help to make it. It was clear from her expression how much it pained her to ask for another favor without even repaying him for saving her life twice.

“Please, I’m begging you to, Nagumo-kun. I want to get stronger, so I can talk to Eri again. Please! I swear we’ll pay you back somehow, so take us with you!”

Inspired by Shizuku’s dedication, Suzu too lowered her head.

There were still a lot of things she wanted to say to Eri, and she wouldn’t be able to unless she got stronger. Hajime could sense her desperation from her voice.

“Come on, Nagumo. Just one. I wanna get strong enough to protect my friends at least. I don’t ever wanna be helplessly forced to watch my friends die ever again.” Even Ryutarou prostrated himself before Hajime. This was the first time Hajime had seen Ryutarou bow to anyone.

He probably blames himself for not being able to do anything in the Great Orcus Labyrinth, or in the recent fight with Eri. Ryutarou clenched his fists so hard his nails drew blood.

Hajime deliberated for a few moments. Normally, he’d never agree to something this burdensome. Babysitting Kouki and the others through the Haltina Woods was the last thing he wanted to do. He was on the verge of telling them to try their hand at the Great Orcus Labyrinth or the Reisen Gorge and leave him alone.

But then he thought back to his fight with Noint, and wavered. In the visions they’d seen in the Sunken Ruins of Melusine, there’d been a girl who looked exactly like Noint. She’d taken control of kings and emperors, and done the gods’ dirty work behind the scenes.

Could Hajime really be sure Noint was the only one of God’s Apostles? That seemed far too naive an assumption.

Noint herself had said that Hajime was an anomaly, and that it was her god’s wish that he die an agonizing death. It stood to reason that if one Apostle had failed, Ehit would simply send an army of them at Hajime. In which case, wouldn’t it be better to help Kouki and the others grow stronger? That way they’d make good fodder for the inevitable clash.

He was seriously considering using other people as meat shields against enemies coming at him. Even for Hajime, that was a new low.

Had anyone challenged his motives, he would have simply countered with “I mean, weren’t you heroes planning on fighting against the gods anyway? What’s the problem here?” And so, for completely selfish reasons, Hajime decided to let Kouki and the others join him in conquering the labyrinth in Haltina Woods. He sent a questioning glance to Yue and the others to make sure they had no objections. As usual, they didn’t.

Shizuku and the rest breathed a sigh of relief.

They thanked Hajime profusely, never realizing that he intended them to be his future meat shields.

“Hajime’s a terrifying man.”

“That’s Master for you. He really is a monster.”

It appeared both Yue and Tio had already seen through Hajime’s plan. They kept their voices low enough that no one else heard.

Hajime ignored their muttered comments and started thinking about the future. His journey was drawing to a close. No matter who stood in his way, no matter how dangerous things got, he’d fight his

way through it all and go home. Together with everyone he cared about.

He once again reaffirmed his resolve, steeling himself for what was to come.

After they finished hashing out the details, Hajime, Yue, and Shizuku headed out into the city.

The main street was a lot noisier than usual.

Normally, all that noise would indicate a bustling, lively city. But most of the voices today sounded subdued. The capital had seen too much tragedy to be lively.

It had only been five days since the battle, and most of the citizens were still grieving the loss of their homes and loved ones.

But despite their despair, they still worked diligently to repair the city. They worked through the pain of their loss, repairing homes and clearing streets. That, more than anything, spoke to how strong humans were.

Hajime took in the restoration effort as he walked down the street, a large bag of pseudo-hot dogs in his arms. Tortus' version of the popular street food used some kind of meat that was somewhat different than a sausage to fill its buns.

Hajime, Yue, and Shizuku all stuffed their faces full of food as they headed to the Adventurer's Guild. Once they finished their business there, Hajime would be going to repair the city's barrier. Shizuku had tagged along because he needed someone to guide him there.

Shea, Kaori, Aiko, and Tio were waiting inside the castle. Shea had realized non-humans wouldn't be very welcome in the city right now, and had chosen to remain of her own volition.

Even if the people knew in their heads that it had been demons specifically who'd attacked them, right now any non-human was a fair target to vent their anger on.

As the capital was the seat of the church's power, there weren't many non-humans living there to begin with. Even possessing beastmen slaves was frowned upon. So Hajime had to admit, Kaori and the others had made the right choice.

Though Kaori's current body looked passably human, no one who saw would think she actually was one. Aiko could have tagged along, but she'd decided to help Liliana with her mounting workload. Tio could easily pass as a human, but she was exhausted after casting Spirit magic nonstop for five days and was taking a well-deserved rest.

"So... what exactly are we going to the adventurer's guild for?" Shizuku took another bite of her cheese-coated pseudo-hot dog and looked at Hajime.

“I need to let them know I’ve completed a quest. To be honest, I wanted to go to Fuhren to tell the person who issued it directly, but it’s too much of a pain to detour south from here. Besides, I’m sure headquarters will pass the report along.”

“Is this... about that Myu girl? Come to think of it, I haven’t seen her around anywhere...” Hajime explained how he’d returned her to her real mother and Shizuku muttered sadly.

“I wish I could have hugged her...” Though Shizuku hadn’t known Myu for long, her cuteness had won Shizuku over already. Yue’s reply to that was one Shizuku certainly hadn’t been expecting.

“Don’t worry, you’ll be able to see her again. Hajime’s taking her to Japan.”

“To Japan? Nagumo-kun, what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. I promised Myu that I’d show her what my home looks like.”

“Wait, but... Myu’s a Dagon.”

Hajime shrugged his shoulders, as if that wasn’t any issue at all.

“I get what you’re trying to say, but it’s really not a problem. There’s probably plenty of ways to make her blend in on earth, and if that doesn’t work, I’ll think of something else. You know what they say, it’s not about whether you can or can’t, it’s about whether you do or don’t.”

“I suppose you do have a point, but...”

“Besides, it’s a bit late to be worrying about this now. Shea’s got bunny ears... Hell, even Yue doesn’t look that normal. She’s whiter than any person on earth, and her teeth are pointed. It’s not like I can change how they look. You didn’t think I’d leave them behind here, did you?”

I suppose that’s true. Shizuku smiled to herself. Next to her, Yue smiled faintly as well. She tugged on Hajime’s sleeve.

Is it just me, or did it suddenly get hotter around here? Shizuku finished off her hot dog and started fanning herself.

She left Hajime and Yue to their flirting and thought back to Kaori. Though at this point she was confident Hajime could do anything he put his mind to whether it seemed possible or not, she couldn’t deny that the path Kaori had chosen was a difficult one.

“You’ve been taking care of Kaori, right?” Shizuku said in a worried voice.

“Hm? Well, you should probably ask her that instead of me. It’s how she feels that matters here, right? Well, at the very least I’d like to think I’ve been keeping my promise to you. I haven’t done anything terrible to her, anyway.”

Shizuku knew from how happy Kaori seemed that Hajime probably was treating her well, but she couldn’t help but ask. Hajime

shot her a look that clearly said “You’re being really overprotective, you know that?” and Shizuku turned away in embarrassment. Yue sighed, and dropped a bombshell statement.

“It’s because you’re so soft that she tries to assault you. You need to be sterner with her, Hajime.”

“O-Okay.”

“Wait, what? Hold on a second. Hajime’s getting assaulted? By who?”

“By Kaori. She already managed to sneak in a kiss. Curse you, Kaori.”

“I-I see. You’ve climbed the stairs to adulthood before me, Kaori...”

Shizuku gazed off into the distance, marveling at how far Kaori had come. In more ways than one. It left her feeling a little lonely.

“Watch out for Aiko too, Hajime. She’s dangerous.”

“You don’t seriously think she’s in love with me, do you?”

Hajime muttered, averting his gaze from Yue’s sharp stare. Their conversation snapped Shizuku out of her reverie and she too gave Hajime a hard glare.

“It appears to me that you’re well aware of the possibility. So, what did you do to her, Nagumo-kun?”

“Hey, don’t automatically assume that this is somehow my fault.”

“You know, Ai-chan was acting pretty weird when she came back to the capital from Ur. She’d start blushing whenever your name came up... I get the feeling you did more than just kill a monster army while you were over there. Now hurry up and confess. This is important! I need to know whether or not Kaori has more rivals to contend against!”

“Look, I really didn’t...” Hajime desperately wracked his brains for anything he could have done that might have made Aiko like him. Before he could figure it out, Yue spilled the beans.

“He kissed her. Passionately.”

“Nagumo-kun! How could you!? She’s your teacher!”

“Wait, calm down. There’s a perfectly good explanation for this, so stop shaking me!” *You damn harem protagonist!* Shizuku thought to herself as she grabbed Hajime by the collar and rattled him back and forth. Hajime hurriedly explained that Aiko had been poisoned, and that he’d needed to feed Ambrosia to her directly or she would have died.

Naturally Yue supplemented that by mentioning that he’d shot Shimizu to spare Aiko mental anguish and rescued her from the church’s clutches as well.

Now I’m certain... Ai-chan’s fallen for him.

“Well, I get that you weren’t doing it on purpose at least... But

surely you must have noticed Ai-chan's feelings too, Nagumo-kun. When did you first suspect it?"

"Probably around the time I comforted her after she blew up Ishtar and the others. She was looking at me kinda... longingly, I guess? I wasn't sure, but I was starting to think, maybe... So she really is in love with me?"

"Yep. She is."

"She definitely is."

Yue and Shizuku nodded without hesitation. Hajime looked tiredly up at the sky. He couldn't believe the possibility he'd written off was actually the case. "What are you going to do about it?" Yue and Shizuku both asked, their gazes piercing into him. Hajime agonized over what to do for a few seconds before coming to a simple, if inelegant solution.

"Alright, I'll just pretend I never noticed."

"Well, I doubt Ai-chan's going to try to come on to you. I suppose it's better than trying to address it and making a mess of everything..."

"Hm...? Oh, I get what you mean now. She definitely cares a lot about being our teacher. So as long as she still thinks of me as her student, pretending I haven't noticed is the best course of action."

I really just thought it was the easiest way of dealing with it. Of course Hajime didn't say that aloud, but Shizuku's penetrating stare told him she'd guessed as much anyway.

Hajime ignored her and started on another pseudo-hot dog. By the time they reached the guild, the three of them had eaten their way through the entire bag.

The capital's Adventurer's Guild was even more impressive than Fuhren's. The grand double doors sat wide open, and throngs of adventurers came in and out. After the invasion, the number of requests brought to the guild had increased exponentially.

The three of them stepped into the guild and got in line at one of the reception counters. There were ten in total, and all were busy. But the receptionists were all consummate professionals, and the line moved forward at a steady pace.

For some reason, each and every one of the receptionists were beautiful women. Beautiful, and cute. Very, very cute.

However, their looks didn't stir Hajime's desire in the slightest. As far as he was concerned, there was no one cuter or more beautiful than Yue. Plus, she was holding his hand. There was no way he'd let his gaze wander to other women in this situation.

Which was why he really wished Yue would stop trying to crush his fingers. *No really, I don't care about any of those other girls!* Hajime lamented to himself.

Shizuku breathed an exasperated sigh, which Hajime ignored, and

walked to the now free receptionist's desk.

He parsed over his Status Plate, and the documents proving that he had fulfilled the request to deliver Myu safely to her family at Erisen.

"By the way, would it be possible to report the completion of this quest to Ilwa, Fuhren's branch chief, from here?"

"I believe so? Was this... a personal request? Please excuse me for a moment, sir." The receptionist tilted her head quizzically.

Branch chiefs rarely made personal requests of mere adventurers, so her confusion was understandable.

The adventurers at the adjacent receptionists' desks were staring slack-jawed at him.

When the receptionist saw the details printed on Hajime's status plate, her jaw dropped open too.

She looked from the Status Plate to Hajime, then back down to the plate and back again.

"Y-You are Hajime Nagumo, correct?"

"Hm? Yeah, that's me. Says so on the Status Plate, doesn't it?"

"My sincerest apologies, but could you head to the guild office? I was given instructions to bring you there if you ever appeared at our guild, Nagumo-sama... Please wait just a short while, I'll bring the guild master out right away."

"Uh, all I want to do is let Branch Chief Ilwa know I completed his request. I need to go repair the capital's barrier after this, so I really don't want to waste too much time here."

"U-Umm, but I really can't allow... I promise I'll bring him out right away, so please just wait a few seconds!" The receptionist sprinted away with Hajime's Status Plate and the documents proving he'd returned Myu safely.

Hajime slumped his shoulders and looked glumly at the floor. Yue and Shizuku both patted his shoulders in an attempt to comfort him.

Just as Hajime was starting to think letting Ilwa know wasn't worth the trouble of whatever these people wanted from him, the receptionist returned. She was accompanied by an old man with shrewd eyes and an impressively long beard.

Judging from his bulging muscles, Hajime was certain that he was one of those buff old-dude types he'd seen so often in anime and manga.

The moment this old man, who Hajime assumed was the guild master, appeared, the main hall broke out in muttered conversation. News spread through the rest of the guild, and before long the guild master's appearance was what every adventurer was talking about.

The guild master's name was Balse Laputa. Mere mention of his name could bring down floating castles. Fortunately, it seemed Balse

didn't have any requests to make of Hajime. He had just heard a lot about Hajime from Ilwa, and had wanted to meet him in person.

So far, every one of Hajime's visits to an Adventurer's Guild had ended with him getting mixed up in something he wanted no part of, so he breathed a sigh of relief when he discovered Balse just wanted to talk. Sadly, nothing Hajime did could ever end without some kind of incident occurring.

"Balse-dono, would you be so kind as to introduce me to your guests? If you hold them in high esteem, they must be admirable adventurers indeed. I would love to get to know them better. Especially those two pretty ladies over there. A gentleman such as myself simply cannot leave without learning their names." A handsome, blond-haired man sauntered up to Hajime and the others. Four beautiful women followed behind him. The other adventurers all began whispering to each other as they spotted him.

Apparently his name was Abel, and he was a gold-ranked adventurer. Furthermore, he'd earned himself the nickname of Blade Lord among other adventurers.

Balse introduced Hajime to Abel. When he mentioned that Hajime was also a gold-ranked adventurer, the others in the guild hall started whispering even more furiously. Hajime didn't like where this was going one bit. He hurriedly tried to usher Yue and Shizuku out of the Adventurer's Guild, but Abel wasn't going to let them leave so easily. It was obvious his interests in Yue and Shizuku were anything but pure.

Shouldn't this guy know Shizuku's part of the Hero party?

Abel flashed Hajime a dazzling smile and said, "Oh, so you're also gold-ranked. You look rather young... How did you gain such a prestigious rank so quickly? Let me guess, you cheated your way into gold... Oops, I probably shouldn't have said that in public. My bad." His perfect smile didn't even waver as he spewed vitriol.

At this point, Hajime was certain Abel wasn't worth his time. Nothing good would come of talking to him. Yue and Shizuku wholeheartedly agreed, and the three of them once again tried to leave.

"Now now. No need to run away because you're up against a real gold ranker. I promise I won't bite. Well if you're too embarrassed to show your face here, I don't mind if you leave, but what about you two beautiful ladies? Could I entice you to join me for a meal? Let me show you what a *real* gold ranker is like." Abel blocked Hajime's way. It was obvious from his attitude that he couldn't dream of any woman ever turning him down.

His arrogance might have impressed someone else, but Yue, Hajime, and Shizuku were all far stronger than him. They just found

his posturing laughable.

Balse, who had heard of how powerful Hajime was, struggled to hide his chortling.

“Hey, Yaegashi. Dealing with handsome losers like these is your specialty, right? I’ll let you handle him. This guy’s like Amanogawa-lite.”

“Excuse me? What do you mean that’s my specialty? Also that’s an insult to my childhood friend. Kouki might be bad, but he’s not this bad... is he? I don’t think he is... Actually, at this point, he’s more pitiable than anything.”

“You’re harsh, Shizuku. But I agree.”

The three of them ignored Abel and walked around him. He frowned. No one had ever treated him with such disrespect since he’d obtained his gold rank. The girls hanging around him glared at Yue and Shizuku.

Of course it had to turn into a fight. Resigned, Hajime decided that if he was doing this anyway, he’d beat up Balse too. The guild master was roaring with laughter as he watched from the sidelines. Before he could make a move, a very deep yet girlish voice called out to him.

“Oh my. If it isn’t Hajime-san and Yue-oneesama~” Chills ran down Hajime’s spine. He reflexively gripped Donner and fell into a battle stance. Everyone turned around at once.

“I-It’s a monster!” Abel screamed.

“And just whooo do you think you’re calling a grotesque, vulgar monster who drives people insane just by glancing their way!?”

The walking bundle of muscles glared at Abel.

His face looked like something out of a juju manga, and his muscles looked bulkier than plate armor. At two meters tall, he towered over everyone. And yet, his red hair was braided in twintails with cute ribbons tying the ends. Not only that, he was wearing a cute yukata. One with fluttering frills everywhere. His musclebound legs were on full display.

For a second Hajime thought it was Crystabel, the clothing store clerk they’d met in Brooke. But on closer inspection, he realized this was someone else.

Assuming Crystabel can’t use camouflage magic or something anyway...

“Eek, g-get away from me! I’ll have you know I’m Abel the Blade Lord, a gold ranked adventurer! If you take one more step toward me, I’ll cut you down where you stand!”

“How cruel! First you call me a monster, now you say you’ll kill me... and we’ve only just met! The other gold-rank adventurer I know is much more courteous. Though... you’re more my type♡”

While Hajime was still recovering from the shock of meeting

another one of Crystabel's kind, Abel was being driven into a corner. *That guy... or would it be girl? Anyway, just by standing there they're making Abel lose his mind.*

The guy? girl? sighed as they as watched Abel back away screaming. Still, Abel was right in their strike zone, so they continued closing in on him. They licked their lips in anticipation and pounced on their prey.

"Get away from me, you monster!" Terrified, Abel drew his sword and brandished it at the musclebound hulk.

He may have been a pompous jerk, but he was still a gold-ranked adventurer. Everyone present assumed a single attack from him would be enough to end the fight. Which was why what happened next was beyond anyone's expectations.

Abel thrust so fast he left afterimages in his wake. Yet the muscle maiden batted it aside with one hand. They then grabbed Abel in a wrestling hold.

Abel's bones creaked from the force of the grapple. He struggled desperately against the muscle maiden, but was unable to escape. It was then that the real horror began.

"Nufufu. Naughty kids need to be punished♡"

"Stop! Let me— Mmmf!?"

Abel started spasming uncontrollably.

After a few seconds his body went limp, and his sword dropped from his hands. It almost looked like he was dead.

The women who'd been hanging around with him turned pale and ran out of the guild hall. Silence blanketed the guild. Finally, the muscle maiden released Abel and he fell to the ground with a dull thud.

At this point, he was clearly the victim.

However, his gold rank wasn't just for show.

He had somehow stayed conscious through the whole ordeal. He squeezed out the last of his strength to glare angrily at the muscle maiden. But then a second later his facade crumbled and he turned to Hajime for help.

"H-Hey, you! You're a gold-ranker too, aren't you!? Help me out here! You probably just cheated your way into gold rank anyway, help me and I'll give you a legit recommendation! You have the honor of helping THE blade lord here! So hurry up and beat this crazy muscle monster for me, you loser!" Hajime just looked pitifully at him. It took a certain kind of scumbag to insult the person you were begging help from. *Actually, if this is the best the Adventurer's Guild has to offer, aren't they kind of screwed?* Hajime shot a questioning look at Balse.

The old man shook his head sadly, as if denying that Abel should ever have been granted such a rank. It was possible *he* was the one

who'd obtained his status through illicit means.

Tired of hearing Abel insult Hajime, Yue stepped forward to put an end to him. Abel misunderstood and thought she was coming to his rescue.

"Oh, you're really going to help me? In that case, I promise to set aside my evening for..."

"Shut your mouth." Though her tone was still neutral, Hajime and Shizuku could tell she was pissed. It appeared Abel had gone too far. Yue held out her hand, and a tiny black sphere appeared in her palm.

"If you don't have the balls to fight on your own, then you don't need them anyway."

"Huh? What do you mean!? Wait, sto— Aaaaaaaaah!"

And so, yet another man vanished from Tortus, and was reborn as a "maiden."

After crushing Abel's testicles, Yue returned to Hajime with a satisfied look on her face.

Every male adventurer in the room was grimacing, their hands over their family jewels. A few of them were weeping. Just watching had traumatized them.

The silence was eventually broken when the adventurers started whispering to each other.

"H-Hey, do you think that blond-haired girl and that white-haired boy with the eyepatch are actually..."

"Wait? Y-You really think she's the Ball Crusher!?"

"No way... So then those two are the Love Smashers..."

"What kind of nickname is that?"

"You haven't heard of them? They're adventurers who came out of nowhere a few months ago. They say that blond-haired red-eyed girl is like a rose. If you let her beauty fool you, you'll find yourself stung by her thorns. She might look like a goddess, but she's actually a demon who goes around crushing men's balls. That white-haired boy with the eyepatch is her companion. He's the very embodiment of irrationality. Words can't get through to him. Don't meet his gaze. Don't talk to him. Don't even let him know you exist. If you value your life, you'll never get near those two. Those are the stories I heard from a bard who came from Brooke. Apparently there's a bunch of guys in Fuhren and Horaud who had their manhoods crushed too."

"That's terrifying!"

It appeared traveling bards had carried rumors about Hajime and Yue all the way to the capital.

The adventurers shivered in fear and averted their gazes. They were fully convinced that Hajime would kill them if their eyes met his.

They edged away, keeping their balls firmly tucked behind their legs.

“What on earth... did you guys do?” Shizuku turned to Hajime and Yue, amazed.

Yue didn't seem to mind the rumors, but Hajime's lips twitched as he heard the nicknames people had made up for him.

Before either of them could reply to Shizuku, the muscle maiden interrupted them.

“It's been ages since I last saw you two. I'm glad you're still the same as always,” the muscle maiden said with a wink.

“Seriously, who the hell are you? Are you a friend of Crystabel's?” Hajime asked warily. The things Crystabel had done to him the day they'd left Brooke still appeared in his nightmares.

Shizuku, who was normally so tactful, was at a loss for words. Her face spasmed, and she hid behind Hajime, using him as a shield.

“Oh my, not even a greeting? Where are your manners... Though, I suppose you wouldn't recognize me like this. I confessed to Yue-oneesama long ago, and she crushed my balls for me... Do you remember now?”

“Oh... Is that really you?” Surprised, Yue looked up at the muscle maiden's face.

They smiled, glad that Yue still remembered them.

It turned out that they were a former adventurer who'd confessed to Yue at Brooke. The same one who'd been so persistent that Yue had ended up crushing their balls. After that incident, they'd come under Crystabel's wing and learned the ways of a muscle maiden.

Their name now was Mariabel (As you can guess, Crystabel was the one who named them.)

“I understand now how inappropriate my actions had been before. I'm sorry, Yue-oneesama....”

“Mmm, you've learned well. You can enjoy your new life with your head held high.”

“Ufufu, I thought you'd say that, Onee-sama. By the way, there's plenty of other people who've come to Crystabel seeking to be her disciple. We had some former black ranked adventurers, some former gangsters, and a few mercenaries who used to operate out of Horaud... There's so many Crystabel's thinking of expanding her shop. I actually came here today to find a suitable place to open a branch store.” Shivers ran down Hajime's spine as he imagined an army of Crystabels. It appeared that thanks to his and Yue's actions, this world had received in an influx of muscle maidens.

The strangest thing was that before, Mariabel had been of middling height. Yet in the span of a few months, she had grown to her current hulking size. Whatever methods Crystabel used to rear her disciples, they weren't normal.

Moreover, as Mariabel had accidentally let slip, Crystabel was actually a gold-ranked adventurer herself. Which was why all of her disciples were such skilled fighters. Mariabel had proved as much when she'd incapacitated Abel without a fight.

A massive army of muscle maidens was the most terrifying thing Hajime could think of.

We really need to get back to our own world, fast. Hajime thought to himself while he watched Yue and Mariabel converse amicably.

"You reap what you sow..." Shizuku muttered behind him.

Annoyed, Hajime pushed Shizuku closer to Mariabel.

Mariabel took quite a liking to Shizuku, and ended up hugging her until she was blue in the face. After they'd left, Shizuku and Hajime got into a huge shouting match, which ended up leading to a lot of people speculating that the two of them were secretly lovers... but that is a tale for another time.

Hajime did his best to avoid thinking about the new threat he'd unleashed onto the world as he headed to where the city's barrier generator was located.

The building was heavily guarded by a contingent of soldiers who glared warily at Hajime as he drew close. Though their expressions softened when they saw it was Shizuku who'd brought him there.

No one challenged them, so Shizuku led them to a spacious marble hall inside the building. At its center stood a cylindrical artifact with magic circles engraved on its sides.

It would have stood two meters tall at its full height, but something had smashed it in the middle. The top half lay in ruins a short distance away.

A number of men and women milled about the artifact, scratching their heads and muttering to themselves. They were probably the people originally charged with repairing it.

"Oh, if it isn't Shizuku-dono. What brings you here?" An old man with an impressive mustache walked over to Shizuku. He appeared to be in his mid-sixties, and had the look of a veteran craftsman. Judging from his tone, he and Shizuku knew each other relatively well.

"Good afternoon, Volpen-san. I've brought a Synergist who might be able to repair the artifact here."

"Truly? Do you mean that boy standing next to you?" Volpen turned his gaze to Hajime and examined him. Though he didn't say it to Shizuku's face, he doubted this young boy could do something so difficult.

Volpen was the head of Heiligh's Synergists, and the best craftsman the country had. The barrier-generating artifact was a relic from the age of the gods, and even someone with his considerable amount of skill was having trouble finding a way to repair it. That was

why he found it difficult to believe a teenage boy would be able to accomplish the task.

Hajime ignored him completely and began weaving his way through the other craftsmen. He reached the ruins of the artifact and placed his hand on the cylindrical pillar. First, he cast Ore Appraisal.

“Huh, I see now... No wonder it’s such a tough barrier.”

“Hmph, what can a brat like you accomplish?” Volpen harrumphed dismissively, but Hajime had already understood the principle behind the artifact that had protected the capital for centuries.

He put both hands to the stone and began transmuting. Red sparks ran down the length of the pillar, and the pieces started knitting themselves back together. The speed and accuracy of his transmutation left Volpen and the other Synergists stunned.

“It’s beautiful...” Shizuku muttered, entranced by the red sparks dancing through the air. This was the first time she’d seen Hajime transmute anything.

“Well, there you go.” Less than a minute later, the artifact had been perfectly repaired. Hajime poured a little of his mana into it to reactivate the barrier. Particles of white light rose up from the cylinder, diffusing into the air.

A soldier ran into the artifact chamber and reported that the third layer had been repaired.

“Unbelievable... You repaired an ancient artifact so easily...” Shizuku smiled wryly and explained to Volpen that Hajime was, like her, summoned from another world.

“No wonder...” Volpen muttered.

When Shizuku mentioned it was Hajime who had made her katana as well, a predatory gleam appeared in Volpen and all the other craftsmen’s eyes. Hajime ignored them and started walking toward the room that housed the next artifact.

But Volpen and the others weren’t going to let him leave so easily. Not after such an envious display of skill.

“Please wait! Take me as your disciple! I’ll do anything!”

“Whoa! Wh-Where the heck did that come from? And stop clinging to my legs! You’re creeping me out!”

Volpen continued begging, and his disciples decided to join in. They clung to Hajime’s legs, rooting him place. Disgusted by the horde of old bearded men rubbing their faces against his legs, Hajime tried to kick them all off. But they were surprisingly stubborn, and held on with all their might.

In the end, he was forced to use Lightning Field to shock them all off. Still they crawled after him, squeezing out every last ounce of their strength. Unable to ignore them any longer, Hajime finally told

them no directly.

“Look guys, I’m leaving the capital tomorrow and I have no idea when I might come back. The last thing I want right now is a disciple, and honestly I probably couldn’t teach you anything even if I did take you on.”

“But you repaired that artifact with such ease. Not only that, you were the one who created Shizuku-dono’s weapon. I couldn’t even begin to guess how to construct such a thing. If you would just teach me your secrets...”

“That’s because I used creation magic along with Transmutation. You guys can’t use magic like that, so...”

“No way...” Volpen’s shoulders slumped in disappointment. The artifact that protected the capital was actually enchanted with spatial magic, which was why the barrier it produced was so powerful. Because of that though, normal transmutation had little effect on it. With enough people working at it for long enough, it could be partially restored enough to be usable, but never fully repaired.

Thinking he was finally free, Hajime turned to leave the room. But though Volpen looked defeated, he hadn’t given up yet.

“That doesn’t change the fact that your Transmutation skills are beyond anything I’ve ever seen! Please, teach me all you know!”

“God you’re persistent!”

A craftsmen’s dedication to his art was not to be underestimated. Volpen was the kind of person who’d go to any lengths to improve his skill.

In the end, Hajime had to repair the other artifacts while listening to the pleadings of the kingdom’s finest Synergists. It was a surreal feeling to have a train of wailing old men following after him.

Somehow the rumor spread beyond just this building, and more and more craftsmen started trickling in to beg an apprenticeship of Hajime. He got so fed up that he threw them all past the city walls, but they just kept coming back, like zombies.

Hajime knew it was probably a bad idea to send all of the capital’s capable craftsmen to the hospital while the city was still being repaired, so he attempted to flee instead. However, the Synergists Guild’s information network had tracked his every move. No matter where he ran, Volpen and the others were there waiting for him. They piled on question after question, and it was clear they wouldn’t leave him alone until he answered them.

Hajime spent the better part of the afternoon playing an impromptu game of hide-and-seek as he attempted to escape the Synergists’ clutches.

“Damn, how are you guys still finding me? I’m using Hide Presence and everything!”

“Hahaha, such skills are meaningless against a craftsman’s intuition!”

“Your passion for your art betrays your location, Nagumodooooo!”

“Haaah... Haaah... We can sense the supremacy of your skill from miles away!” When it came to sensing like-minded people, the Synergists were even better at it than Hajime.

Hajime seriously considered using Donner and Schlag on them. They were creeping him out so much that he almost would rather kill them then let them touch him.

Eventually, news of the commotion reached the castle. All of the Synergists had left their post at once, and the city had devolved into chaos. Liliana had to head out personally to restore order, so the craftsmen were convinced to give up.

“Yaegashi... you could have helped, you know. They’re your friends, aren’t they?” Hajime trudged back to the palace and glared at Shizuku, who was enjoying a cup of tea.

Yue, who was sitting next to her, got up to pour Hajime a cup as well. She really was devoted to Hajime.

So devoted that when a horde of bloodthirsty craftsmen had started chasing him around the city, she’d surreptitiously left along with Shizuku.

“Don’t ask for the impossible. It’s true that I got to know them pretty well since they did some work on the katana you gave me, but there’s no way I could have gotten them to stop.”

“You must be tired, Hajime.” Yue walked over to Hajime and tenderly took his head into her arms. He hugged her back, and then carried her over to his seat.

“Now that is just unfair. Yue left you too, so how come...”

“What are you talking about? There’s no way I’d treat you and Yue equally, is there? There’s a lot of things that would piss me off if you did it, but if Yue did it I wouldn’t care.”

“Well, seeing as she is your girlfriend, I can understand that, but... I still want to punch you in the face.”

Just because Shizuku could understand the difference in their treatment didn’t mean she had to like it. Besides, even if it was natural for a couple to flirt with each other, it still irked her to see them flirting in front of her face.

Hajime sat Yue on his lap and started feeding her tea cakes. *I’m totally just a third wheel here, aren’t I?* Shizuku thought to herself. Just as she was about to flee to the safety of Kaori’s room, Hajime’s door was flung open with a bang.

They all turned to see a young, blond-haired blue-eyed boy

standing in the corridor. He couldn't have been more than ten years old.

He glared at Hajime, his glare growing in intensity when he saw Yue sitting on Hajime's lap. It seemed their intimacy bothered the boy.

"You monster! How dare you do that to Kaori! A-And why are you off playing with other girls when you have her... Unforgivable!" The prince of Heiligh, Lundel S. B. Heiligh, stalked into the room.

He balled his hands into fists and rushed at Hajime with a primal roar. He wasn't going to be satisfied until he punched Hajime.

Hajime casually plucked a sugar cube from the tea tray next to him and flung it at Lundel. It flew faster than Lundel's eyes could follow and smacked him squarely in the forehead. He fell to the ground, the back of his head slamming into the floor. Then, he cradled his head in his hands and rolled around the on floor in pain.

Finally, he recovered enough to stand up and charge at Hajime again, so Hajime fired off another sugar cube. This one hit Lundel with such force his head snapped back. The cube bounced back up in the air while Lundel soared a few meters back before crashing into the floor.

"Y-Your Highness! How dare you do that to the crown prince!?"

"I'll kill you for that!"

"Men, protect the crown prince!"

Lundel's bodyguards poured into the room and rushed at Hajime.

Thunk! Thunk! Thunk! Each guard was met by a sugar cube that sent them flying in a beautiful somersault.

But Lundel and his guards were both tougher than Hajime expected, and they got back up. Impressed by their persistence, Hajime grabbed one giant handful of sugar cubes and fired them all off.

Thunk! Thunk! Thunk! Thunk! Thunk! Thunk! Thunk! Thunk! Sugar cubes slammed into the guards at the rate of a machine gun. Lundel and his guards spasmed on the ground, as if they were having a seizure.

Though Hajime made sure not to use too much force, the cubes still hurt.

Shizuku watched on in shock as Hajime continued tormenting the prince and his guards. By the time she finally returned to her senses enough to try and stop him, everyone was lying on the floor writhing in pain.

Hajime stopped once he'd ran out of sugar cubes and surveyed the damage. Lundel was lying on the ground bawling his eyes out.

He hadn't been seriously injured, but the barrage of attacks had broken his soul.

His guards rushed up to him, trying to reassure him.

"Don't worry, Your Highness, the wounds aren't too deep!"

Just then, Liliana stepped into the room and analyzed the scene. Shizuku was scolding Hajime for going too far, while Hajime ignored her and continued sipping his tea. Yue sat on his lap, stuffing herself full of tea cakes. Lundel was crying on the floor while his attendants tried to console him.

She massaged her forehead, more or less understanding the situation from that single snapshot.

“Looks like I was too late...”

“Princess. I think your brother’s a little mentally unstable. Think you could take care of him for us?”

And whose fault is it that he’s like this!? Liliana wanted to yell at Hajime, but it was partly Lundel’s fault for starting things, so she just heaved a heavy sigh and went to comfort Lundel instead.

The source of Lundel’s anger was of course what had happened to Kaori.

When he’d seen how different Kaori looked, Lundel had demanded to know what had happened.

The answers he’d received basically pointed to Hajime being the culprit. That alone had made him pretty angry, but when he’d seen how fondly Kaori spoke of Hajime, his rage reached a fever pitch and he’d gone after him.

Then, when he’d seen Hajime, the man who had forced Kaori into a new body (or so he’d convinced himself), the man who Kaori loved more than anyone else, wrapped around the arms of another girl he’d completely lost it and rushed at him.

He’d fully believed himself the brave knight rescuing the poor princess from the clutches of the demon lord. Sadly, the demon lord he was up against was far stronger than him.

Lundel hadn’t even been able to get close to Hajime. He’d been beaten down with one hand, and a trayful of sugar cubes. It was the shame of such a humiliating defeat that had left him in tears, not the pain.

He sobbed into Liliana’s chest, crying her name over and over.

Maybe I really did go too far. Hajime thought as he scratched his cheek awkwardly.

Shizuku shot him another angry glare. *Yeah, that was probably really immature.*

Sadly, Lundel’s travails were far from over. For it was then that Kaori walked into their room.

“Oh, Prince Lundel. And Lily, you’re here too...? Wait, is Lundel crying!? What’s wrong!?”

“K-Kaori!? Uhh, I-I wasn’t crying in my sister’s arms or anything...” Lundel quickly extricated himself and wiped his tears. No man wanted to be caught crying in his sister’s arms by the girl he

loved.

Kaori could easily tell what had happened when she saw Hajime, Shizuku, and Liliana's expressions. She rebuked Hajime, but in a way that did more damage to Lundel than her intended target.

"Jeez... Hajime-kun. Don't go making the prince cry. You shouldn't be bullying little kids."

"Hey, he's the one who came at me. I just thought I'd punish him a little for it..."

The fact that Hajime had never been taking him seriously in the slightest shocked Lundel. But what hurt him even more was the way Kaori had talked about him. Lundel clutched his chest and groaned in pain.

"Punish him... Did you at least go easy on him? Remember, the prince is still a child!" The searing pain in Lundel's chest grew tenfold. Being treated like a child by the woman you loved was the greatest shame a man could suffer.

"Of course. I just flung a few sugar cubes at him. Look, he's not even that hurt. You don't really think I'd pull my gun out on a kid, do you?"

"But he was crying in Lily's arms... Plus, look at how red his forehead is. How could you ruin his cute little face? I know he's a little prone to misunderstanding things and rushing in without thinking, but Lundel's a good kid at heart. You should be nice to him..."

And now Kaori was pointing out how cute he looked. Furthermore, she'd clearly seen through the fact that he'd been crying in his big sister's arms. Lundel fell to all fours and hung his head in despair.

"Uh oh..." Lily muttered to herself. Shizuku and Lundel's bodyguards begged Kaori to stop. Any more of her inadvertent verbal barbs, and they were worried she might really kill him.

Unfortunately, Kaori wasn't done yet. She went over to Lundel and spoke in a voice filled with worry,

"Are you okay? See, Hajime-kun, you were too hard on him..."

"No really, I'm fine. More importantly, Kaori... What do you think of me?" Though he was covered in scars, Lundel worked up the courage to ask the question burning in his heart.

"What do I think of you? Let's see... I'm kind of jealous of Lily, I guess. I wish I had a rambunctious little brother like you."

"Gah... L-Little brother..."

Kaori delivered those words with a smile, but they were poison to Lundel's ears.

Why do you have to rub salt in the poor kid's wound!? Shizuku yelled to herself. She implored Lundel to quit before he hurt himself any

further with her gaze.

Lundel, unfortunately, had far too much foolhardy courage to stop now. His father had died only a few days ago, and until just recently he'd been crying into Liliana and his mother's arms every night. But just the other day he'd made a promise at his father's grave. That he'd be strong. And he wasn't going to turn back on his word. He would be king one day. He couldn't let himself be so weak that a little pain could deter him.

"So then... you'd rather be with *him*? What's so good about that guy anyway!?" Lundel glared daggers at Hajime. It was obvious he thought himself the better man. Even now, Yue was nestled in Hajime's lap. You couldn't blame Lundel for thinking of Hajime as a terrible womanizer.

Sadly, Kaori had set her heart on Hajime and Hajime alone.

"Huh? Wh-What's this all of a sudden? Jeez, that's so embarrassing. But, fufu, yes, I suppose I would. He's the man I love the most in the world. As for what's good about him, well... everything. Fufu..."

With that, Lundel's hit points finally reached zero. He sunk to all fours again, his entire body trembling.

Kaori worriedly rubbed his back, but he slapped her hand away and struggled to his feet. Once he was up, he dashed straight for the door.

Before departing for good, he turned back at the doorway and screamed.

"I hate you alllllllllllllll!" After that, he dashed down the hallway and out of sight.

Tears glistened in his eyes as he fled from the room. His screams echoed loudly through the halls.

His dumbfounded bodyguards returned to their senses and hurriedly chased after him.

"That's youth for you."

"D-Don't sound so unconcerned... It's your fault he's crying right now."

"Nah. I mean, I guess I started it... but Kaori's the one who finished him off."

"Grr, I can't deny that..."

Hajime and Shizuku bantered with each other as they watched Lundel's first love wither away in a spectacular fashion. Kaori made to go after Lundel, but Liliana stopped her. Kaori had done enough damage. Liliana knew her brother would eventually have had his heart broken by Kaori, so she was prepared for this. She'd just sleep together with him tonight and comfort him like usual. Lundel would be the king of Heiligh very soon. It was probably best he experienced

having his heart broken once or twice before he had to deal with the rigors of kingship.

Liliana closed the room's door and walked over to Hajime, with Kaori following behind her. It appeared she'd come here not to find Lundel, but to speak with him.

She sat down in the seat next to Shizuku while Kaori attempted to situate herself on the other side of Hajime's lap. A short wrestling match between Kaori and Yue ensued where they each tried to push the other off.

In the end, they both remained sitting on the edge of Hajime's knees, their arms locked. If Kaori had been in her old body, she wouldn't have stood a chance against Yue. While Yue might have specialized in magic, her ability to control mana directly and strengthen her body had still put her leagues above Kaori. But in her new form, Kaori was the one with the advantage.

"Kaori... you've become so strong..." Shizuku muttered.

"Uh, Shizuku. Could you stop staring and break them up already?" Liliana replied, watching Yue and Kaori worriedly.

The shock of Kaori's death, however temporary, had turned Shizuku into a far less capable woman than she had been. Letting the only person with common sense left in their class devolve into a blubbering mess was something Hajime wanted to avoid, so he flicked Kaori's forehead and forced her onto the seat next to him.

"Aww, why is it always Yue?"

"Fufu, I'm the only one allowed on Hajime's lap."

"Can we get back on topic please..." Liliana asked hesitantly. Everyone ignored her.

"Hajime-kun..."

"Don't give me that look, Kaori. Isn't sitting next to me good enough?"

"Fine. You can have his hand."

"Huh? Really? Then can you stroke my cheek like you always do for Yue? Or is that too much?"

"If that's all, then I don't mind, I guess."

"Ehehe, thanks, Hajime-kun."

"Okay, I'll wait. I'll wait until you're all done. Then you'll finally listen to me, right? *Sniffle...*" Liliana sobbed to herself, having completely missed her opportunity to butt into the conversation.

It was only thanks to Shizuku's intervention that Hajime and the others finally returned their attention to the princess. Now that she'd had her fill of Kaori, Shizuku was back to her normal, serious self.

The fact that Hajime was willing to indulge Kaori a little now proved that their bond had grown deeper, but Shizuku knew it wasn't the time to dwell on that.

“Ahem. What I wanted to discuss were the rumors you asked me to spread regarding the fate of the Holy Church, Nagumo-san... Surprisingly enough, people believe them. It appears Aiko-san’s fame as the Fertility Goddess is greater than I expected.”

“I see. Well, people believe what they want to, after all. Especially when the story’s exaggerated and sentimental. I didn’t think there’d be any problems. The real question is how well the story’ll hold up when people start digging deeper... Well, no point worrying about it.”

“Indeed. Though I still find it difficult to believe that our entire faith was built upon a lie... It’s fine if one or two individuals know, but if the truth gets out to the public we’ll have riots in the streets. Your suggestion was truly a lifesaver, Nagumo-san. Thank you very much.” Liliana thanked Hajime, a troubled expression on her face.

Shizuku tilted her head, wondering what her friend was talking about. It turned out had asked Liliana to spread rumors about the head temple’s destruction. They wouldn’t be able to hide the fact that the cathedral had been blown up forever, and the faster the palace provided an explanation the better.

Naturally, however, Hajime knew Liliana couldn’t tell the people the truth. The fact that Ehit, the god everyone praised, was actually an uncaring monster who treated people like playthings would have sent people into a panic. Especially if they discovered all of the priests and bishops they put their faith in were actually deranged maniacs.

Therefore, Hajime had drafted an alternate explanation and passed it on to Liliana. She had then used that as a basis for what she’d told the people.

Namely, that an evil god had brainwashed the high-ranking bishops. Liliana had claimed that they had been the ones to betray the capital to the demons.

Which was why, according to Liliana, Aiko had reluctantly taken up arms against the corrupted church.

Pope Ishtar had fought valiantly together with her and died in the resulting conflict.

Supposedly Aiko’s sword had turned into a pillar of light in the middle of the fight, which was the huge ray that had killed the demon army.

Or at least, that was the story Liliana told people.

It wasn’t the truth, but it wasn’t technically a lie either. At the very least, the most important facts were true.

Furthermore, Aiko had gone around telling people that this new evil god was going around masquerading as Ehit. And that if they wanted to stay true to the teachings of the real Ehit, they needed to start thinking for themselves. For otherwise, they would be led astray. They needed to decide what was right and wrong for themselves, and

not just rely on the teachings of the Holy Church. It was only by doing so that they would be able to honor Ishtar's memory. On top of giving such speeches, Aiko had also attended Ishtar's memorial service.

In other words, Hajime's plan had been to create a fictional "good Ehit" and tell people that Aiko was working for him. That way he could pretend all of the problems stemmed from this fake evil god who was actually the real Ehit, and plant the first seeds of doubt in the people's minds.

If both the evil god and the "good Ehit" called themselves Ehit, then people wouldn't just blindly be able to put their faith in "Ehit." They would need to think for themselves whether or not anyone invoking the name of god was preaching something good or evil.

This story also helped avert the panic that would occur if Liliana had just told everyone the god they'd believed in was a deranged lunatic. Most importantly, though, it meant that if Hajime ever had to seriously pit himself against Ehit, he might be able to count on the people's help.

"I see. You like to plan pretty far ahead, Nagumo-kun. I guess that's why you only told Ai-chan the truth of what you'd learned at first too..."

"I hope you didn't think I was a brainless musclehead. Though, usually they're just things I come up with on the spot and try in the hopes that they might work. It's not too much of a loss if they don't, and I can always fall back on shooting my way through things if I have to..."

"Fufu. I didn't mean it like that. I was praising your foresight. If anything, it's reassuring that you think this far ahead."

Shizuku looked at Hajime, impressed. He simply shrugged in response.

Kaori and Yue glared at Shizuku, angry that she understood Hajime in some way that they didn't. Shizuku started when she noticed their glares and stammered.

"Wh-What? What's wrong?"

"Yue, what do you think?"

"Hmm... She's still okay. They're just friends for now."

"I suppose. For now, anyway..."

"Mhm... We must be careful."

Yue and Kaori whispered to each other. Shizuku couldn't hear them, but she had a sinking feeling she knew what they were discussing. And once again, Liliana was ignored.

Hajime stared at the two of them warily, worried about their whispered dealings. Whenever those two started colluding, nothing good came of it.

That evening, a single figure stood in front of the massive monument honoring the spirits of Heiligh's dead. The sun's final rays cast the palace grounds a dazzling shade of crimson, and the monument cast a long shadow into the mountain wall from which it had been carved.

"I'm so sorry..." Aiko muttered.

Numerous flowers and offerings dotted the monument; many brave soldiers had died recently.

The battle was still too recent for the dead to have all been tallied, so the most recent casualties didn't have their names carved into the stone yet. Once all of the names were in though, Captain Meld would be the first to be added here.

Among the offerings, Aiko spotted a pair of weapons that she recognized. A longsword and a spear. They had been the artifacts of choice for two of Aiko's students— Daisuke Hiyama and Reichi Kondou.

Aiko wasn't even sure what she was apologizing for anymore. Was she sorry she'd never be able to bring them back to Japan? Sorry that her students had caused the deaths of innocent people? Or sorry that she herself had killed so many? Dispirited, Aiko hung her head. She only stirred when she heard footsteps heading her way.

Aiko knew he'd made his footfalls heavy to alert her of his presence. Hajime normally walked much quieter.

Aiko slowly turned around.

"Nagumo-kun..."

"Fancy meeting you here, Sensei."

Her eyes met his. The fading orange light of the sunset was reflected in his clear pupils. In his hands he carried a single flower. It appeared he'd come here to make an offering. Aiko was surprised that Hajime of all people would do such a thing.

Hajime saw the bewilderment on her face and smiled awkwardly.

"Even I feel a little sad when people I know die, Sensei."

"Huh? Oh, uh, I didn't mean to imply that..." Flustered, Aiko flailed her arms around wildly. She hadn't expected to hear such hurt in Hajime's voice.

He shrugged his shoulders, indicating that it wasn't a big deal, and silently walked up to the monument.

Aiko kept shooting him sidelong glances, but his attention was completely occupied by the memorial in front of him. It seemed he had no intention of talking, either.

Aiko found the silence unbearable, and spoke more to dispel the gloomy atmosphere than anything.

"Umm, are those flowers... for Hiyama-kun and Kondou-kun?"

"Hell no. They're for Meld."

Hajime raised an eyebrow at Aiko. *You seriously thought that?*

“Why Meld-san...?”

“Well, it’s not like we knew each other that well or anything, but I respected that guy. He was the country’s knight commander. He could have had anything, but he still worked so hard for us. And even though he messed up a bunch of times, he always kept on trying to improve himself... He deserves at least this one flower for all of that.”

“Nagumo-kun... Yes, I suppose he does...” Aiko watched Hajime with a gentle look in her eyes. She was glad there was still so much humanity left in Hajime. He might kill his enemies without any mercy, but he also mourned for those he cared about. Enough that he was willing to bring an offering to their graves.

In truth, Hajime had just wanted to escape being dragged into the bath by Yue and the others. He’d been walking down the palace halls and spotted a flower in a vase, and had thought bringing Meld an offering would be a good way to kill time. Of course, he didn’t mention that to Aiko. Besides, he’d meant what he said. He may have come here on a whim, but he truly believed Meld was someone who deserved to be remembered.

Hajime put thoughts of Meld in the back of his mind and focused his attention on Aiko.

“You’re not blaming me...”

“Huh?” Aiko tilted her head in confusion.

“About Hiyama’s death. This isn’t like what happened with Shimizu. Sure, maybe monsters were the direct cause of his death, but I’m the one who killed him. I killed one of your precious students. Kondou too. Even if he was already dead, I was the one that blew apart his body. I figured you’d be mad at me.”

“.....” Aiko’s smile vanished, replaced by a brooding frown.

Hajime waited patiently, giving Aiko as much time as she needed.

The two of them stood there silently for what seemed like hours.

Finally, Aiko spoke hesitantly.

“To be honest, I’m not sure it’s that simple. Hiyama-kun murdered Shirasaki-san. That’s not something I think can be easily forgiven. Of course, I do think he should have lived so he could repent for his crimes, but I can understand your choice. The same goes for what you did to Kondou-kun. You must have been furious, Nagumo-kun. You cared deeply for Shirasaki-san, and she had been murdered before your eyes... It would be unfair of me to get angry at you just because this wasn’t the outcome I hoped for. Besides, I no longer have the right to judge you.” Aiko crossed her arms and absently rubbed her elbows, as if trying to warm herself up.

“Because of what you did to the Holy Church?”

“.....” She nodded silently. Hajime’s words and Tio’s restoration

magic had helped Aiko keep her sanity right after the event. But as time passed, the guilt had started eating away at her again.

Hajime noticed that there were dark circles under Aiko's eyes that she'd hidden with makeup. She hadn't been sleeping well the past few days. *She probably sees nightmares about that explosion.*

Silence returned to the small field they were in. Hajime didn't know what to say.

Unable to withstand the oppressive silence, Aiko once again spoke up.

"Nagumo-kun... doesn't it ever bother you?"

"The fact that I've killed people? No, not really. I think the time I spent in the abyss broke those parts of me, so I can't really sympathize."

"....." Aiko's looked sadly up at her student. It pained her that Hajime had suffered so much that he'd been forced to throw away parts of his humanity to survive.

"No one... blames me."

"Hm?"

Aiko's true feelings spilled out.

"No one blames me for killing them. My students still look at me the same, and the people in the palace even thank me for what I did."

It was true. The other students had been too shocked by Hajime's display of brutality to think much of the fact that Aiko had killed a couple of bishops and the pope. In fact, they respected her for fighting on their behalf. The nobles and ministers, too, all were grateful to Aiko for saving them from Noint's brainwashing.

"I told David-san and the others what I'd done, but all they said was that they needed some time to think. Even though I was the one who destroyed the foundations of their faith, even they didn't blame me." Aiko bit her lip so hard she drew blood.

She wanted someone to condemn her. After all, she was a murderer. Knowledge of that sin was a heavy burden. Only madmen and monsters thought nothing of killing. Most people would be agonized by guilt.

It would actually have eased her pain if someone condemned her for her crimes, which was why Aiko had unconsciously looked for someone to denounce her. However, no one did.

Hajime was confident that Tio would have been able to obliterate the Holy Church even without Aiko's help. It might have taken some more time, but she would have done it. So to Hajime, it felt like Aiko was taking on too much responsibility for something that wasn't really her fault. He scratched his cheek awkwardly, looking for the right words to say.

"I mean, in the end, it was Tio's breath that killed everyone. You

just helped her do it, right, Sensei? You don't have to take responsibility for all of their deaths..."

"That doesn't matter! At that time... I helped Tio knowing that it might lead to their deaths. That makes me no different from a murderer!"

Aiko retorted with more vehemence than Hajime expected. Embarrassed by her outburst, she shrunk back into herself.

After a moment's silence, Hajime asked her a question.

"Do you regret helping?"

"Ah... No. I was prepared for the consequences... There was no way I could ignore what the pope and the bishops were trying to do... And I didn't want you to die... Plus, if I'd left them alone, it would have been my students who would have suffered later, so..."

Pained though her voice was, there wasn't an ounce of regret in it. She'd known Ishtar was trying to help Noint kill Hajime. And she'd also known that the rest of her students would be next. She'd resolved herself to dirtying her own hands, if it meant saving them.

Even now, she still believed that was the right decision. But that logic didn't help ease the anguish she felt at being a murderer. Feelings weren't rational, after all.

Hajime let out an inaudible sigh. *I'm the student here, so how come I'm the one who has to give out advice? I just came here to kill time, too...*

He thought back to what Yue and Shizuku had said about Aiko being in love with him. Maybe that was why she was confiding to him now. She was starting to see him more as a man, and less as a student.

Hajime glanced about, trying to think of the right words to say.

"Sensei, are you going to continue being my teacher?"

"What?" Aiko didn't expect that line of questioning. She remembered Hajime asking her something similar before.

Back then she'd replied "Of course!" without hesitation, but now...

"....." She hesitated. Was it really alright for someone who'd murdered to guide others?

Aiko grit her teeth so hard they almost cracked. She felt incredibly conflicted. Hajime knew she'd have a hard time replying, so he continued.

"If you still want to keep being our teacher, even after this... could you listen to this one selfish request of mine?"

"A selfish... request?" Aiko looked up at him in confusion. Her face was pale, and she looked ready to collapse at any minute.

"Yeah." Hajime turned away from the monument and looked Aiko in the eyes.

There was a warmth to his gaze that sucked Aiko in. She felt a little more reassured.

Hajime saw himself reflected in Aiko's eyes, and felt the weight of

responsibility settle on his shoulders. He made sure to choose his words carefully. But no matter how carefully he phrased it, his request was certainly the epitome of selfishness.

“Sensei... I want you to hold on to that guilt you feel forever. I want you to feel burdened by it. I want you to do things the right way. Fight for the right reasons, agonize over those you kill, and cry about what you’ve done. To me, you’re the most human person here. You feel all these emotions I’ve long since lost... You’re the role model I look up to as what it means to be truly human. That’s why I want you to continue suffering. Because you’re the example I’m learning from. I think, if I keep watching you, I’ll at least be able to act more like a human should when we return to Japan.”

“Nagumo-kun...” Aiko’s eyes opened wide in surprise. Hajime hadn’t tried to comfort her, or condemn her. No, he’d asked her to continue suffering.

Yet it was these words that chased away the dark clouds that hung about her heart. This selfish request had done what no amount of comfort or condemnation could have.

Accepting the consequences and necessity of her actions would be the hardest thing Aiko had ever done. Especially because of how traumatizing the event had been. There had already been so many times she’d wanted to just run away from what she’d did, or broken under the strain. There would probably many more times like this in the future, too. But her personality and her resolve wouldn’t let her. That would just make the ordeal more painful.

She only knew she could do it because there would always be someone there to prop her back up if she was about to collapse. Someone who’d lost his humanity, but was trying his best to remember what it meant to be human.

This really is the most selfish request I’ve ever heard. It was a merciless, kind request. Clear teardrops streaked down Aiko’s cheeks. She’d held in her tears all this time, but now the dam finally burst.

Hajime turned away awkwardly and mentioned one last thing.

“Well, if you absolutely feel like you can’t bear it anymore... and there’s no one else you can rely on... and I mean *no one* else... I don’t mind lending you a shoulder to cry on.”

“You... really are...” Aiko smiled weakly and leaned against Hajime’s back. He was purposely acting like he hadn’t seen her already start crying.

“In that case, I’d like to borrow your shoulder for a little bit, Nagumo-kun.”

“Go for it, Sensei.”

Aiko leaned into Hajime, entrusting herself to him. Crying, she reaffirmed her dedication to always being everyone’s teacher. And to

always bear the sins of what she'd done. She felt that as long as a certain selfish student of hers was watching, she could keep on going.

Their shadows elongated as the sun slipped below the horizon. Aiko's sobs were the only thing that could be heard in the darkening palace grounds.



Once Aiko had finished crying everything out, the two of them had returned to the palace. Aiko's flushed face and embarrassed expression raised a lot of eyebrows, and Hajime broke out into a cold sweat when he realized how this looked to Yue and the others.

As always, Yue, Shea, Tio, and Kaori had then dragged Hajime into their room.

Shea's noisy complaints did bother him a little, but what truly terrified him was Yue's silent glare.

In the end, David and the others returned to serve under Aiko again. It appeared their love for her had won over any loyalty they might have felt to the Holy Church.

Traveling with Aiko had introduced them to many different ways of thinking, and their perspective on the world was different from when they'd first been assigned as her guards. Plus, they'd started growing suspicious of the Holy Church when Ishtar had refused to let them meet Aiko and ordered them to remain on standby in the capital.

Naturally, the knowledge that Ehit cared nothing for them and that the Holy Church had been decimated had still come as a shock. But in the end, they'd come to accept that they couldn't hate Aiko, and that she'd made the right decision.

It was of course possible that they were just looking for something to cling to. For they had converted and become adherents of the Fertility Goddess Aiko. Either way, they had sworn to protect her with their lives.

Their love for Aiko had sublimated into a kind of cult fanaticism, but it was possible that was what they needed to accept the destruction of the Holy Church.

"I can't believe you! Why do you keep doing this!?"

"Hajime-kun... You really should be more careful about what you say to people."

"Fufufu, I expected no less from Master. I take my eyes off him for a moment, and he has already gotten another woman to fall for him..."

The three girls complained about Hajime while eating dinner in the main hall. Hajime ignored their pointed glares and continued enjoying the splendid feast laid out before him.

Next to him, Yue said nothing, but she did shoot Hajime a dirty look. Considering the situation, she couldn't really blame Hajime for doing what he had, but that didn't change the fact that Aiko clearly thought of him more as a love interest than a student.

It was a complicated situation all around, and Yue did have a little sympathy for Aiko. After all, Hajime's plan for dealing with her feelings was to pretend he hadn't noticed them.

“Hajime, do you think Aiko will break?” When Hajime had told her what had happened between him and Aiko, Yue had grown a little worried. Hajime lowered his fork and thought about it for a few seconds.

“Hmm, I think she’ll be fine. Worst comes to worst, I’ll just make her an artifact with spirit magic that’ll keep her sane. Knowing her though, I don’t think we have to worry. She’ll get better in time.”

“I see. That’s good.” Yue’s gaze softened, and Hajime smiled.

“Yue-san... I should have known. You’re always two steps ahead.”

“Is this... what makes Yue better than me? Gah, I won’t lose! I definitely won’t lose to her!”

“Impressive. I know not whether she does it unconsciously or on purpose... but she always knows how to tug at Master’s heartstrings. She truly is a master of seduction. I cannot help but be amazed.”

“That doesn’t feel like praise.”

Shea looked shocked, Kaori was gritting her teeth in frustration, and Tio watched Yue in admiration. Yue grimaced slightly in response, but Hajime simply stroked her hair reassuringly and smiled wryly.

Kouki and the other students walked into the dining hall, interrupting the party’s lively meal. Aiko was with them as well, so everyone who’d been summoned from earth was gathered here.

Hajime looked over at them and raised an eyebrow. He’d actually asked what time Kouki and the others usually ate so that he could pick a time they weren’t there. However, it seemed his plan had failed.

Well, it’s not that big a deal, Hajime thought and returned to his meal. Yue went back to eating as well.

The classmates all milled about uncertainly. Some were brimming with curiosity, others weren’t sure how to approach Hajime and his friends, while others felt uncomfortable in their presence.

They kept on shooting Hajime furtive looks throughout their meal. The students all knew by now that he had absolutely no interest in any of them, and didn’t see himself as one of their comrades anymore, which was why they hesitated to speak to him. Aiko was shooting Hajime glances as well, but for a very different reason.

“Ah, Shizuku-chan! Come sit with us!”

“Is it really alright if I sit next to you guys?”

“Of course it is.”

Hajime wasn’t sure he’d ever get used to Noint’s grim face smiling so openly. Shizuku didn’t seem to mind though, and she took a seat next to Kaori.

The other students had found it hard to believe that Kaori had really been reborn in a different body, but that smile was just so her that they had to accept it was really Kaori in there.

Even in Noint's body, Kaori's warm smile had the power to make an entire room relax. Compared to the time everyone had thought Hajime had died, Kaori's temporary death had been far less of a shock.

Kouki sat down next to Shizuku, and Suzu and Aiko settled in across from them. That put Aiko directly next to Yue.

The other classmates all settled in on either side of Hajime's party. Suzu appeared to be rather nervous in the presence of Yue. When she first sat down she stammered some odd words.

"S-Sorry for interrupting your meal, ma'am..."

Yue tilted her head, wondering why Suzu had referred to her as "ma'am."

The moment Kouki and the others were seated, the palace servants brought out food for them. It was the same high-quality fare they had served Hajime.

As everyone began eating, Aiko accidentally met Hajime's eyes. She blushed beet-red and turned away. After a few more furtive glances, Aiko whispered,

"U-Umm, Nagumo-kun... If possible... could you not tell anyone..." Yue felt a little miffed that the two of them were talking with her sitting right in between them, but she held it in. She knew how embarrassing it must have been for Aiko to cry in front of Hajime, and she could understand wanting to make sure he didn't say anything to anyone else.

Hajime mentally thanked Yue for not saying anything and turned his gaze to Aiko.

When their eyes met again, Aiko blushed to the tips of her ears. Shizuku and the others knew it was already too late to do anything about Aiko's infatuation, but that didn't stop them from glaring at Hajime. Fortunately, the other students couldn't see Aiko from their angle, so most of them didn't even notice. Only Kouki and the other frontliners sitting nearby saw, but they didn't immediately understand the reason for Aiko's blushing.

Atsushi and the other male members of Ai-chan's guard squad all glared resentfully at Hajime.

"That bastard, he's totally gotten her to fall for him now," they muttered under their breath.

Yuka, Nana, and Taeko tried to look uninterested, but it was obvious they were trying to sneak glances at Aiko and Hajime.

"What are you talking about, Sensei? Did something happen?"

"Huh?"

Hajime put on a perfect act. For a second, Aiko was confused, but then she realized he was playing dumb on purpose and smiled knowingly.

"No, of course not," she replied.

Though it was a little vexing that Hajime was always looking out for her, Aiko felt a little happy about it too. She smiled faintly.

The more they watched, the angrier all of the girls got at Hajime. Only Yue was still on his side. She patted his shoulder affectionately and started feeding him food.

Such was the power of the main heroine. She was on a completely different level from the others.

I really do have the best girlfriend in the world! Hajime fell for Yue all over again. As he was mentally thanking Yue, Shea tugged on his sleeve from the other side.

“Hajime-san, say ahhh...” Shea was tired of all these new rivals popping up, and was determined to remind them that she was vying for his affections too. Blushing slightly, she brought her fork to Hajime’s mouth. She made sure her bunny ears brushed against him as she did so. Shea was just as crafty as the others.

Hajime was used to this at this point, and he let her feed him without a fight. Shea’s ears and tail twitched happily as she watched Hajime eat her food.

Naturally, Tio and Kaori weren’t going to let this go without a fight. The two of them thrust out their forks as well, intent on feeding Hajime themselves.

“H-Hajime-kun, have some of mine too! Say aaah!”

“Master, I implore you to try some of my food. Please open wide.”

“Just this once, you two.”

There was only so much of the same food he could eat before he got tired of it. To be fair, he ate some of Kaori and Tio’s food, then put a stop to the feeding. Both Kaori and Tio melted when they saw him eating it.

“This is... starting to get really awkward...” Shizuku muttered, her expression stiff. Suzu, Kouki, and Ryutarou all grimaced awkwardly.

For a moment, Aiko considered trying to feed Hajime as well, but then snapped back to reality and mentally berated herself for even considering such a thing. The others ignored her one-woman comedy act.

Fortunately, the other girls all started squealing to each other, dispelling the awkward atmosphere. They’d been afraid of Hajime before, but now they were gossiping about his love life. On the day Hajime had fallen into the abyss, no one would have even imagined that he would have returned with a harem of girls. It stood to reason that all of the girls in the class were burning with curiosity regarding his relationships.

Even the guys had stopped being so timid around Hajime. Though that was mostly because they were burning with jealous rage instead.

Every single one of the girls in Hajime’s harem was a beauty

without peer. Shea especially drew a lot of attention. Otaku or not, most guys found bunny girls irresistible. The way her bunny ears twitched when she smiled at Hajime had everyone smitten.

But no matter how jealous they were, no matter how badly they wanted to ask Hajime the secret to getting Tortus girls to fall for him, none of the guys had the courage to speak to him.

They felt bad for making fun of him before, back when they'd all thought he was incompetent. Furthermore, the innate pressure Hajime exuded made it hard to go up to him.

Only those who had spent some time with Hajime were able to converse normally with him. And those that could, like Nagayama and Yuka, were eager to ask him questions.

But before they could engage him, Hajime turned his attention to Kaori, who was blushing while looking at her fork.

After a moment's deliberation she came to a decision and apologetically popped the fork into her mouth. She blushed even deeper.

Hajime was about to say something scathing like "What are you, twelve!?" but Yue beat him to the punch.

Kaori noticed Yue's gaze on her and met her eyes. It was then that Yue pounced.

"Pervert..."

"Y-You've got it all wrong! I'm not a pervert! I-I was just eating my dinner!"

"Dinner seasoned with a side of Hajime."

"Th-That's not true! Besides, Tio's way more of a pervert than I am! Look, she's licking her fork all over!"

"*Slurp! Slurp! Slurp!* Hm?"

Red-faced, Kaori pointed to Tio. She stopped slobbering all over her fork and looked questioningly at Kaori.

"What seems to be the matter?" Tio showed Kaori the fork, emphasizing that there was nothing on it. She was definitely tasting something other than the food. Hajime tried not to think about it. Over time, Tio had transformed from a perverted masochist into a plain regular pervert.

"Tio, stop that before I send you flying." Hajime rubbed his temple and gave Tio her only warning.

"Mrrr, if you insist. But you have yet to kiss me, Master. Unless I do this, I will be unable to sate my burning lust." Her reply only irked Hajime more.

Just then, Tio's eyes lit up as she remembered something.

"Oh yes! I remember now! You still have not given me the reward you promised, Master! I demand you do so now!"

"Huh? Reward?" Hajime scrunched up his face, but then clicked

his tongue when he remembered what Tio was referring to.

The others looked at him quizzically, and Shea asked the question they were all thinking.

“What’s this... about a reward?”

“You see, when we were fighting at the Divine Mountain, Master promised me a reward if I could keep Sensei-dono safe. And as you can see, she is still hale. Nufufufu... Master. You would never go back on your word, now would you?”

“Hey, that’s not fair!” Shea and Kaori yelled at the same time, but Tio wasn’t swayed. With everyone’s attention on him, Hajime turned reluctantly to Tio. He put his chin in his hands and responded to her.

“Alright, what is it you want? Don’t forget, I only promised to do anything as long as it’s reasonable.” Like the time he’d given Shea her reward, he wasn’t going to acquiesce to requests like “sleep with me.”

Tio nodded in an exaggerated fashion, indicating that she understood. Then, fidgeting a little in embarrassment, Tio spoke her request.

“Fear not, I shan’t ask for the impossible. I just want you to punish my arse... like you did when we first met.” Tio put her hands to her cheeks and squirmed in shame. *I can’t believe I really said it!* As far as she was concerned, it was a reasonable request because Hajime had already done it before. Forget the fact that it was a pretty hardcore fetish. *I should have expected this from a pervert like her.*

As Hajime had feared, everyone but Yue and the others shrunk back in disgust.

They looked at Hajime as if he were some kind of heinous criminal.

“Hell no, you perverted dragon. And stop saying that in a way that people’ll misunderstand.”

Shocked at his refusal, Tio vehemently protested.

“B-But why? Surely this is a reasonable request! All you have to do is drive that thick, hard, black pole into me like you did last time! Then, when I beg you to take it out you simply must ignore me and keep pushing deeper! All I wish is for you to mercilessly torment my arse!”

“How many times do I have to tell you, stop causing misunderstandings!”

Hajime had been upgraded from “heinous criminal” to “monster” in the other students’ eyes.

“But you can’t deny that that is the truth, right Nagumo-kun?” Unhappy that all the other girls had gotten to feed him, Aiko followed up with a barbed statement.

“She isn’t lying...”

“Yeah, he really did stab her with it.”

“Yeah, Nagumo-kun, you have no mercy!”

Yuka, Nana, and Taeko decided to dogpile onto Hajime as well. They ostensibly sounded like they were whispering, but Hajime could tell they’d meant for everyone to hear.

The students’ suspicion transformed into certainty, and they all glared at Hajime.

“Hajime-san, you can’t really call it a misunderstanding...”

“Hajime, it’s because of you that Tio’s a pervert. Accept responsibility.”

Even Shea and Yue had betrayed him now.

“N-Nagumo-kun... How could you do such a thing... to Tio-san...”

“Hajime-kun, I’m so jealous... I mean, you need to answer for your actions...”

Everyone was looking at Hajime as if he were the demon lord himself. Hajime abruptly stood up, his chair clattering backward. He raised his right hand high, and pulled his black pile bunker out of his Treasure Trove. It was already covered in red sparks.

A bead of cold sweat dripped down Tio’s face.



“Okay, Tio. I’ll give you the reward you wanted. You wanted it in your ass, right? I’ll gladly stick it in harder and deeper than last time. It’ll be over so fast you won’t even have time to scream.” It was only then that Tio realized she’d gone too far.

He’d only driven it into her ass last time because they’d been in the middle of a fight. Seeing everyone look at him as if he were some kind of pervert had tipped him over the edge.

Perhaps the most maddening thing was that he couldn’t actually say Tio was wrong.

“W-Wait, Master. I know this is what you used last time, but that doesn’t necessarily mean I want you to use it every time. If you put that inside me, I’ll truly die! I’ll apologize for being so impertinent, so please put that dangerous weapon away!”

“No need to be shy, Tio. Didn’t you say you wanted this? Going to your room would take too much time, so let’s just do it here.”

“Oh nooooooooooooo, Master’s serious! Yue, Shea, Kaori!!!!!! help me! Stop him!”

Sobbing, Tio turned to Yue and the others for help. Even she wasn’t so much of a masochist that she wanted to die. Or perhaps she was. The fact that she was panting a little meant she was beyond help now.

She fled to Kaori and tried to hide behind her chair. Her terror was enough to satisfy Hajime, and he returned his pile bunker to the Treasure Trove with a hmph.

Though now the other students were convinced he was scarier than a demon lord. Rumors of a white-haired demon lord with an eyepatch started circulating through the capital after that, but fortunately for Hajime’s sanity, he never found out.

“Alright, what do you really want? I don’t mind giving you a reward, as long as it’s nothing perverted.” Sighing, Hajime flopped back into his chair. Around him, everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

No one present had wanted to see a beautiful young woman’s ass ravaged by that deadly weapon.

“V-Very well. In that case, may I request for the right to sleep next to you? Usually it’s always Yue and Shea next to you. I’ve never once had the opportunity to do it. Is that a reasonable enough request for you?”

“Yeah, that’s not a problem. You should have just said that from the start.”

“My surging passion cannot be quelled so easily. Please try and understand.”

Hajime turned back to Shea, who shrugged.

“I guess I have to let her,” she said in a resigned voice.

It appeared Hajime would be spending tonight sandwiched between Yue and Tio. Once they got in bed he had no doubt he'd be sandwiched by something else entirely, though.

The girls began gossiping with each other again, while the guys muttered angrily to themselves.

After that, Hajime was treated to a lecture from Aiko about how indecent it was to sleep with multiple women. Though she sounded respectable, her issue wasn't so much that Hajime was sleeping around than it was simple jealousy. She interrupted midway to point out that after the things he'd done with Yue, something as innocent as sleeping was hardly a problem. That led to Yue smiling seductively and flirting openly with him, which in turn led to the students getting even noisier, and a number of the male students got very uncomfortable boners. Needless to say, it was quite a chaotic dinner.

Hajime watched the ruckus while thinking back on the events of the day.

He'd brought Kaori back from the Divine Mountain and showed everyone her new body, watched as a gold-ranked adventurer was robbed of his family jewels, and spent an afternoon running from crazed Synergists, which had resulted in Liliana having to personally come to put an end to the chaos in the city. He had then beaten down the crown prince and watched his first love wither away. And after all that, he'd run into Aiko while looking for a way to kill time, and ended up consoling her. Finally, at dinner he'd struck terror into the hearts of his former classmates.

All that, in a single day. It seemed that trouble and mayhem were fated to follow him, wherever he went.

Tomorrow he would leave for the empire together with Liliana. He had no intention of actually stepping foot in the empire's capital, but he'd learned now to never say, or think, never.

I wonder what'll be waiting for us in the east... Hajime smiled his usual fearless smile, ready for anything the world might throw at him.

Epilogue

A thick fog hung over the Haltina Woods. This vast sea of trees was the least explored part of Tortus, and was considered one of the Seven Great Labyrinths.

The mist that covered the forest made it impossible to see more than a few meters in any direction. The forest itself couldn't be navigated, either through magical means or mundane.

It was common knowledge that fending off the dangerous monsters that lurked within the forest with half of their senses blocked was nigh impossible. Beastmen, the only species unaffected by the forest's misleading mist, prowled the forest's depths, killing any humans lucky enough to survive the monsters. It was for this reason that people referred to it as the Forest of the Forgotten. Neither humans nor demons had any hope of returning once they stepped into its uninviting depths.

It was precisely because of these harsh conditions that the beastmen had made the Haltina Woods their home. The sea of trees acted as a natural barrier against the outside world.

Within the forest's center was Verbergen, the greatest of the beastmen cities. Inside its walls, all of the beastmen races lived together, and the city boasted the forest's greatest military.

Outside the forest's protection, beastmen were weak. Unlike humans and demons, they couldn't use magic and were often hunted for sport or to be turned into slaves. But here, in their stronghold, they were undefeatable. Or at least, they had been. Until this fateful day.

Charred trees littered the floor. A section of the forest had been completely burned away. Beyond the hellscape lay a transformed Verbergen. Wails of lamentation and furious roars filled the streets.

The normally tranquil forest was ablaze.

Smoke, ash, and blood filled the streets of the beastmen capital. Bootprints and animal tracks covered the forest floor, and many of the cities' houses had been burnt to a crisp.

Verbergen's assailants were no longer here. Nor were most of Verbergen's citizens. They hadn't been killed, though. They'd been kidnapped.

"Hmph. They sure got beat bad. They fought to the death, and they still couldn't stop these guys." A shadow observed the decimated town from atop the ruins of the main gate.

Their rabbit ears flapped in the wind, and a wisp of smoke blew past them. Though people often thought of rabbitmen as adorable, harmless creatures, the one currently surveying the wreckage had an unbelievably grizzled look to him.

Cam Haulia, for it was indeed him, seemed more like a hardened war veteran than a cute rabbitman. He was the chief of the Haulia clan, and Shea's father.

One after another, more shadows alighted around him. Below, a number of rabbitmen gathered before the main gate.

They were all members of the Haulia clan. Cam's entire clan had come. And they all looked like veteran fighters. Anyone who'd seen them would have wondered what happened to the stereotype that all rabbitmen were gentle, weak, peace-loving creatures.

These rabbitmen had killers' eyes. Even though Verbergen had been destroyed, they were all smiling fearlessly.

"Sir, I've finished gathering intelligence from the outlying villages."

"Let's hear your report." Cam folded his arms and observed the newcomer. He was a young, imposing rabbitman, with a cross-shaped scar on his cheek.

According to the rabbitman, many of the non-Haulia rabbitmen living in Verbergen and the surrounding villages had been taken away by this new enemy.

"Did you suffer any losses?"

"Of course not. No Haulia would be so foolish as to get caught. A few of my men are injured, but all are still in fighting shape."

"Good. Organize a pursuit team to tail the enemy. I'll be taking command of the operation. Have everyone else fortify our defenses and prepare for the next attack."

"Roger!" The youth saluted crisply and vanished as suddenly as he'd appeared.

Cam had his men step a few paces back and took in Verbergen's destruction.

"Those damned murderers!" he spat, a murderous gleam in his eyes.

After a moment's silence, Cam quietly called out orders.

"The scum who invaded our homeland are still out there somewhere." The other rabbitmen licked their lips in anticipation.

"They've kidnapped our brethren, and plan to work them like slaves." A passing bearman spotted the group of bloodthirsty rabbitmen. He screamed and quickly fled in the other direction.

Supposedly, bearman were the strongest among the beastmen, but one had just fled from a group of rabbitmen. He looked like a little girl who'd seen a bear in the forest.

Cam ignored him and asked quietly.

“Will we let this stand?”

“Never! Never! Never!”

The rabbitmen’s roars shook the trees. The people in the city trying to organize rescue efforts shivered.

“Are we going to cry ourselves to sleep, like we used to in the past?”

“Never! Never! Never!”

“That’s right. We will never let this stand! We’re not the same weak rabbitmen who ran whenever things got dangerous! And we never will be again! In the name of our esteemed boss, we will drive these invaders from our homeland!”

Cam spoke with a fiery passion. He made a fist and pumped it into the air.

“Let’s show these bastards how sharp the weakest race’s fangs are! We’ll teach them a lesson they’ll never forget! We’re going to strike fear into the hearts of these worms!”

“Cut their heads off! Rip out their entrails! Gouge their hearts out! Kill them all!”

There was a soft rustling noise, as a wolf-like monster fled to the safety of its den. It had been planning on making a meal of some of the beastmen left in Verbergen, but after seeing how terrifying the rabbitmen army was it had run with its tail tucked between its legs.

The rabbitmen’s bloodlust was so great that it was palpable. Cam smiled in satisfaction as he looked over the frenzied members of his clan. He sucked in a deep breath and looked his people in the eyes.

“Let’s make those imperial motherfuckers regret ever stepping foot into Haltina!” Cam slammed his fist into his palm, as if bringing down the hammer of holy retribution.

In response, the others screamed.

“YAHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!” The entire forest trembled.

In the distance, alarm bells and cries of “Enemy raid! Enemy raid!” could be heard. The people remaining at Verbergen had mistaken the bloodlust rolling off the rabbitmen for an actual attack. All things considered, it was understandable.

Confusion and chaos spread through the ravaged city.

The rabbitmen ignored it all and continued shouting their war cries. A certain monster of the abyss had trained them well.

Their anger was so great it could be felt even hundreds of miles away.

“Hah!?”

“Whoa, Shea, what’s wrong?”

Back in Heiligh Palace, Shea’s rabbit ears stood on end and she

jumped to her feet. Hajime yelled out in surprise, and Yue, Tio, and Kaori all turned to see what the commotion was.

“Ah, sorry, don’t worry about it. I just thought my dad was doing his gangster yells again...”

“The heck’s that supposed to mean? Anyway, you sure you’re not just overexcited since you’ll get to see your family again soon?”

Hajime said that with a smile, but Shea blushed and nodded sheepishly, her rabbit ears still standing straight up.

“Maybe. I hope everyone’s doing alright. And I hope they haven’t gotten themselves mixed up in anything dangerous.”

“Who knows. I know it’s partly my fault... but those guys are tough. And really belligerent now.”

“Gah, now you’ve gotten me all worried. Please be alright, guys!”

Her ears started flopping back and forth. Shea hoped her prayer would reach her family. Not knowing that at this very moment, Cam and the others were about to pick a fight with an empire. Not knowing that the war to follow would have repercussions around the world, and change the standing of beastmen forever. How could she? No one could have predicted what would soon come to pass.

Extra Chapter: The Secret Society, “Soul Sisters.”

This is a record of our beloved Onee-sama, Shizuku Yaegashi's, daily activities.

I understand how insolent it is for someone like me, a lowly royal guard attached to the princess, to even write about our beloved Onee-sama. But I wish to leave behind an accurate record so that historians a hundred or a thousand years later do not misconstrue the kind of person she was.

First, I suppose I must address the question of who Onee-sama is. She is a heroic figure, one bound to be spoken of for generations to come. It is inevitable that historians and schoolchildren alike will learn of her great deeds. And it is for this reason that I must leave behind a detailed record of her true nature. For as I mentioned before, historians often distort the truth to fit their preconceptions.

Onee-sama hails from another world. In her previous home, she was known as one of the greatest swordsmen alive.

No one her age could hold a candle to her, and no challenger had been able to defeat her. She was, at the very least, the greatest swordsman in her country.

God himself was impressed by her skills, and summoned her here to bring this world salvation.

I must say, you picked wisely, God. There were a number of others who were summoned with her, along with some obnoxious boy who calls himself the fated hero, but they are not important to the telling of this tale, so their stories have been omitted.

Let me be the first to say, Onee-sama is wise, beautiful, and chivalrous beyond measure. Not only is she a master swordsman, she's skilled in the academic fields as well. Proficient in both the pen and sword, as they say. Despite her apparent superiority, she isn't arrogant in the slightest. She is a true goddess who greets everyone with a smile, regardless of their station.

Excuse me, don't you think you're being a little too rude toward the other heroes?

Very well. Allow me to leave behind my wondrous meeting with Onee-sama, and how I came to refer to her as such inside my heart.

It was not long after she had been summoned to this world. Onee-sama, along with the other heroes (They were technically summoned by him, so I suppose I must refer to them with reverence) were training outside the city walls.

The female knights had been put in charge of training the female heroes. However, there were not enough to go around, and I had been temporarily pulled from the royal guard to assist in the heroes' training.

I must say, you picked wisely, Captain Meld. As the heroes hadn't had to fight in their old world, they had trouble even with captured, weakened monsters. Occasionally, a few them would even take so long that they were attacked.

Naturally, it was my job to dispose of them if they became a threat to the heroes. However, one time when I was killing a monster that had gotten too close to a hero, she panicked and fired off a spell. I was able to avoid it in time, but just barely. As a result, I twisted my ankle.

I was embarrassed I had let myself get injured, and I did not wish to worry the heroes, so I pretended nothing was wrong. Around the time training was over, my ankle was smarting quite fiercely.

I slipped away from the others and headed toward the infirmary. However, I was unable to walk properly at this point, and the going was rough. Just as I was beginning to wish a horrific curse that made them sweat profusely from their armpits on the hero who had caused my injury, I felt my body suddenly grow light.

Wondering what happened? Brimming with curiosity? Very well, let me tell you.

Onee-sama had appeared, and was carrying me princess-style to the infirmary!

"You hurt your leg back there, didn't you? I'm sorry I didn't notice sooner." Those gentle words enveloped my trembling body, leaving me in a daze.

Before I knew it, she had carried me all the way to the infirmary.

"I understand it might be difficult for you, but you don't have to be that formal with us. After all, we're the most inexperienced ones here. So please guide us, Sensei." Onee-sama had said that with a dazzling smile. Though I was just a lowly knight, she had thought about my position and gave me the most comforting words she could.

I could feel my heart beat faster, and I suddenly grew embarrassed. I told Onee-sama I could walk now, and asked her to let

me down. Not only had I caused our divine Onee-sama trouble, I was still wearing my armor! I must have been so heavy! If Onee-sama had actually said as much to me, I would have hung myself then and there! And yet, all Onee-sama gave were comforting words.

"I can't do that. It's my fault you ended up like this, so at least let me carry you. Besides, even in your armor, you're as light as a feather." Onee-sama gave me a playful smile and lifted me up and down to prove how light I was. It was then that I wrapped my arms around her. She chuckled, and hugged me back.

It was at this point that I was smitten with her.

"Onee-sama..." When I called her that, Onee-sama had smiled gently at me. It seemed to me that her smile was a little forced, but I suspect that was just my imagination.

"Umm, I'm younger than you, you know that right?" Her voice seemed a little strained, but I ignored that. After all, I wanted so badly to be her younger sister. If not in truth, then at least in spirit. I could be her soul sister at least! It was in that moment that my entire world went pink.

I respect and adore my wonderful Onee-sama, but if I had to mention one thing that bothered me about her, it would be that she's made everyone else also want to be her soul sister.

In fact, there was a silent, but bloody conflict to decide who would be Onee-sama's true soul sister. In the end, it was decided that we would form the secret society, Soul Sisters, and keep watch over Onee-sama from the shadows.

Our organization's present objective is to somehow snatch the position of Onee-sama's personal maid away from Nia.

There is no doubt in my mind that that vulgar girl thinks herself Onee-sama's closest confidant.

How presumptuous of her. Though I must admit, I *am* jealous.

By the way, Onee-sama has a single best friend. Her name is Kaori Shirasaki. Us Soul Sisters have fallen in love with Kaori-sama. She treats everyone with kindness, no matter who they are.

For some reason, Kaori-sama is infatuated with a fellow hero (if he can even be called that, LOL) Hajime Nagumo. She tries to woo him every chance she gets. Naturally, this means Onee-sama inevitably comes into contact with Hajime-sama quite often as well.

How much of Onee-sama's precious time will he take up before he's satisfied? It appears she seems to be more interested in him than she is in any other man, too. I cannot for the life of me understand it. All he can do is make things out of rocks... Of more important note is the self-styled hero, Kouki Amanogawa. He is quite close to Onee-

sama, and everyone agrees that they would make for a good couple. For his impertinence, I cursed him with dark magic to always sneeze at the most inopportune moments.

Captain Kuzeli discovered that I had done so and punished me with a beating. How did she find out?

This is heartbreaking. Onee-sama has gone to train in the Great Orcus Labyrinth.

She is no longer here. All of us Soul Sisters have been reduced to walking corpses.

Great news! Onee-sama has returned from the labyrinth.

Well, it's not all great news, sadly. Hajime-sama has perished in the labyrinth. Kaori-sama suffered such a shock that she is still unconscious even now.

Onee-sama refuses to leave Kaori-sama's side. Though she is maintaining her composure, it hurts to look at her when she's like this.

She is worried about Kaori-sama, of course, but it seems Hajime-sama's death is weighing heavily on her mind as well.

Onee-sama has recovered a little now that Kaori-sama regained consciousness. However... I've come to realize that I have misjudged Onee-sama.

I had believed she was an unshakable rock, someone that couldn't be hurt no matter what happened. A true angel sent to us by God. However, that isn't the case.

In truth, Onee-sama is a girl like anyone else. She gets hurt, she cries, and she mourns like any other person.

It's because I've been watching her all this time that I know. Though she's putting up a strong front for Kaori-sama, Onee-sama is hurting just as much as she is.

But unlike Kaori-sama, Onee-sama wasn't in love with Hajime-sama. Her pain stems from a much simpler emotion. Regret that she could not save her friend's life, and the fear that she might be next. It is clear that these, and other worries, have been tormenting our poor Onee-sama.

And yet, it's only us Soul Sisters who've realized this.

Naturally, we cannot leave her like this. And so, we shall formulate a plan to cheer her up.

First, all of us shall present Onee-sama with gifts.

I pray that our burning love reaches Onee-sama! She smiled when

we gave her our presents, so I would like to believe that we eased her sorrow a little.

“Wh-Why are all of you calling me Onee-sama? I don’t even recognize some of you! When did your group get this big!?” I recall her grimacing a little when she said that, but I do not think she was actually displeased.

Onee-sama has completely recovered. As proof, she was able to defeat the Behemoth that had halted their progress before, and reach a level of the labyrinth no one else has before.

Onee-sama truly is amazing.

A messenger from the empire arrived, so Onee-sama returned from the labyrinth.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the events that transpired.

The emperor himself challenged our self-styled hero to a match in order to test his strength. I don’t care if this hero’s her childhood friend or what, he has no right to be so close to Onee-sama. It pisses me off that everyone thinks they should be a couple, and that he acts like they should too. I know this is petty of me, but I was so glad to see the emperor beat the hero to a pulp. What I didn’t foresee happening though, was that damned emperor proposing to our Onee-sama! How dare he!?

Naturally, as the representative of the Soul Sisters, I immediately cursed him with dark magic that made his toes unbearably itchy.

Onee-sama thought he had athlete’s foot and cringed away from him! Somehow, Captain Kuzeli found out and beat me senseless again.

“Are you trying to start a war or something, you moron!?” She had yelled when she found out.

Of course, my response had been the obvious one.

“If it was for Onee-sama, I’d pick a fight with the whole world!” After that, I’d given a very impressive salute.

I can’t seem to remember what happened after, my memories appear to be fuzzy.

I suspect I was beaten unconscious by Captain Kuzeli.

I vaguely recall Captain Kuzeli muttering something odd.

“She’s beyond helping now,” I thought I heard, as I faded into unconsciousness. I’m probably recalling incorrectly, however.

More importantly, Onee-sama totally turned the emperor down!

Serves you right, you smelly emperor! I must say, Onee-sama looked so impressive when she faced him down without flinching.

After all, objectively speaking, any normal girl would have been overjoyed to marry into royalty. Especially since the emperor’s actually rather handsome.

In fact, I'm a little worried about Onee-sama's tastes in men if she didn't find him attractive.

Don't tell me, she really does have the hots for the hero... If it turns out that really is the case, I will have to unleash my inner wrath.

Worried, I brought up the topic the next time I saw Onee-sama.

"Onee-sama. What kind of guy is your type?"

"Can you please stop calling me Onee-sama? Also, could you maybe not sit so close to me? I can feel your breath on my face. Please get away from me."

"Don't tell me you're into guys like that hero? (lol)"

"Please don't make fun of my friends. Also, shouldn't you be guarding Lily right now? If Kuzeli-san finds you here she'll throw a fit, you know that? So get—"

"Who cares about the princess. What matters right now is your preferences, Onee-sama."

"How could you say that!? You're part of the royal guard! Also you're really creeping me out right now! Someone, help! Kaori! Nia! Meld-saaaan! Someone save me!"

"Fear not, no one will interrupt us. The Soul Sisters have cleared the area of people. Now tell me. Don't worry, there's nothing to be embarrassed about."

"I'm plenty scared right now!"

"I won't leave until you answer my question. I'll follow you to the labyrinth, and even to bed if I must."

"How come you're emphasizing my bed more than anything!? Fine, fine, I'll tell you, so just stop! Hey, where do you think you're touching!?" It's quite rare to see Onee-sama making such a tearful face. I know I won't forget that expression for the rest of my life.

At any rate, Onee-sama had been backed up to the wall, and was trembling for some reason. Probably embarrassment for having to divulge her tastes. Oh, Onee-sama, you're so cute.

I love how she stopped using polite speech at the end there too. She clearly thinks of me as a close sister, instead of a distant acquaintance now.

For some reason, Onee-sama gave my question serious thought. She was trembling the whole time too.

"H-Hmm... I guess I'd like someone who could protect me." So that's Onee-sama's tastes.

I must say, I'm quite surprised. Though in retrospect, perhaps I should have expected it.

She blushed in embarrassment, and for a moment she looked not like a great hero, or a master swordsman, but just like any other normal girl.

Unfortunately, Onee-sama is one of the strongest people alive. A

few people think she might be even stronger than our resident hero (lol).

I doubt even the emperor or Captain Meld could defeat Onee-sama if she was serious. In other words, no man strong enough to protect Onee-sama exists.

“I see. So you have no interest in men at all! That’s wonderful.”

“What on earth made you think that!? Also, wait, you have a really serious nosebleed! I think you need to get that checked out!”

After that, Onee-sama carried me princess-style to the infirmary. The experience was so euphoric that I passed out. Though that might have been the blood loss. The nurse told me I’d almost died, but I think it was worth putting my life on the line for the information I gathered.

I can say with confidence that Onee-sama has no interest in men. She prefers women.

Devastating news. Onee-sama will be returning to the Great Orcus Labyrinth.

The lamentations of the Soul Sisters could be heard throughout the capital on the day of her departure.

Great news. Onee-sama will be returning again.

Kaori-sama wasn’t with Onee-sama when she returned.

It’s obvious that Onee-sama misses her. The fact that her ponytail is drooping is proof.

I must comfort her without a moment’s delay!

For some reason, Onee-sama tried to flee from me. However, I was able to finally catch up to her. I may slack on occasion, but I’m still part of the royal guard.

“I wish you’d show some of that enthusiasm when you’re actually guarding Lily.” Despite her loneliness, Onee-sama is still worrying about the princess. How kind of her.

Upon talking more with her, I’ve come to discover a shocking fact.

Hajime-sama is actually alive. On top of that, he’s become unbelievably strong. I can’t imagine that boot-licking boy is actually that powerful now.

Apparently, he defeated a bunch of monsters and a demon that not even Onee-sama could stand up to. On top of that, he saved her from certain death... Good going, Hajime-sama. Anyone who protects our beloved Onee-sama deserves my praise.

“Shouldn’t you care about how strong those monsters were, or

how a demon got here, or something?” What are you saying, Onee-sama? There’s nothing in the world more important than your safety.

Onee-sama was so nonplussed that she was almost impressed by my persistence. I took that opportunity to ask her for more details on what had transpired.

Upon doing so, I discovered some interesting things.

“I was really surprised back then. Can you believe it? He drilled straight through the labyrinth’s ceiling to get to us. I think he called his weapon a pile bunker. I’m not quite sure what it is, but it looked like a massive stake, and it crushed one of the strongest monsters in one hit! It actually looked rather pretty with all the red sparks shooting off its sides... Oh yeah, what do you think was the first thing Nagumo-kun said when he came down to save us? ‘I see you two are as inseparable as always.’ Couldn’t he have said something more fitting? Oh yeah, and he didn’t look worried at all about all the monsters surrounding him. Turns out, that was because they weren’t any trouble for him. It was ridiculous. He pulled out railguns and all these other crazy weapons you only see in sci-fi stories that he’d all made himself and--” Onee-sama talked nonstop about Hajime-sama. Even though I have a photographic memory when it comes to things involving Onee-sama, I wasn’t able to remember the entire conversation.

I do remember that her eyes were sparkling as she spoke, though. She must have been very excited.

I’d never seen Onee-sama like this before. It was as if she’d met the hero of her dreams and— Allow me to digress for a moment. The whole time Onee-sama was talking, there was this strange black sword sitting on her lap. I’d never seen that weapon before.

Since she would have gone on forever if I hadn’t stopped her, I interrupted her story and asked about the sword.

Can you believe her response?

“Oh this? I... got it from Nagumo-kun, actually. He said I’d need a new weapon since my old one broke. I really owe him a lot. Did you know, my style of swordsmanship actually works better with curved blades like this. They call these katanas back in my world. I’m extremely grateful he made this for me. Oh and, can you believe it? He said it would cut really well, but that was an understatement. It’s like it’s enchanted or something with how easily it can slice through anything. On top of that, it’s balanced perfectly, and it’s just the right weight. It feels like the katana was made just for me! It’s unbelievable! And the craftsmanship is amazing! You get what I mean!? Oh and, Nagumo-kun also said—” That settles it. I’m going to kill Hajime-sama. I can’t let that bastard live.

I swear here that I will end his life no matter what it takes. I

mean, can you blame me? Onee-sama was talking about Hajime-sama nonstop, and she was hugging the sword he'd given her the whole time. I was honestly worried she'd start blushing and cupping her cheeks.

It was obvious how happy she was.

For my own sanity, I convinced myself that her happiness stemmed from how good the sword was, not the fact that Hajime-sama was the one who'd given it to her. That absolutely, positively, surely, must have been the case. Still, Hajime-sama deserves to be cursed for what he's done.

It's time to gather, my Soul Sisters. Our foe this time is stronger than any we've faced.

After that, the palace started to grow strange, and I was suddenly called back home. My father is actually an earl, and our estate lies northwest of the capital. Anyway, it seemed my grandfather had passed away.

To be honest, I didn't want to leave Onee-sama's side, but my older brother, who was also an officer in the army, drugged me and carted me back against my will. I can't believe I was so careless. I'll never forgive you for this, brother.

I've finally returned to the capital.

I can't believe what happened in my absence. The beautiful grassy plain that lay in front of the capital has become a charred wasteland. The city's walls are crumbling and full of holes. Even the training grounds within the palace look like they've seen a fight.

Oh, and the king's dead.

Captain Meld and a lot of my comrades are dead as well.

What in Ehit's name happened here?

When we were given a report on what happened my brother groaned and fainted. At any rate, it turns out Onee-sama's safe. That's all that matters.

It's time to use my Onee-sama locating magic and jump into her arms.

"Onee-sama! Aaah, Onee-sama! Thank goodness you're safe!"

"Where've you been this whole... Oh yeah, you went back home before the attack happened, didn't you? Or something like that? I'm glad you didn't get mixed up in the fighting."

Onee-sama's words filled me with such joy that I feared my heart might burst. It sounded almost as if she'd forgotten about me, but I wasn't too worried about that. Us Soul Sisters don't sweat the small details.

Onee-sama told me what had happened.

Demons invaded the capital. Eri-sama betrayed everyone. Many people died. Hajime-sama came back. He fell from the sky like before. Kaori-sama's in critical condition. Quite a bit happened while I was gone it seems.

Regardless, now I know my enemy's face. It turns out he's the white-haired kid.

He looks so different from his old self that I hadn't even realized that was Hajime-sama.

Time to die, my mortal foe. Let's start by using dark magic to curse him with explosive diarrhea.

Hehe, I've been planning this for a long time now, and I've already made sure to hide all the toilet paper in all the bathrooms. I also know this curse works because I tested it on one of those disgusting boys who's always leering at Onee-sama. He thought it was food poisoning, but it was actually my curse. I'd made sure to steal all the toilet paper in the bathrooms around the dining hall too. It turned into a pretty big incident, but now's not the time to dwell on that.

Now, suffer in shame and embarrassment before my beloved Onee-sama!

Actually, forget it. I think I won't go through with it after all.

After all, Hajime-sama was the one who saved Onee-sama's life.

You did good, Hajime-sama. I'll let you go, just this once. I'm definitely not giving up because I'm scared of that golden-haired beauty who's always hanging around him. True, she always seems to be looking right at me the moment I'm about to cast any spell, and sure her crimson eyes are a terror to behold, but she hasn't cowed me!

Actually, what is it with Hajime-sama's group anyway? Kaori-sama's become pretty weird now too, and the rest of his party are all crazy strong monsters. I can feel, like, this aura of intimidation coming off of them.

Oh, and all of his comrades are really hot girls. Well, Onee-sama's still better looking.

Anyway, it looks like all of those hot girls are in love with Hajime-sama.

I can't believe they're flirting when the capital's in such dire straits. I wish they'd act more like Onee-sama. Every time I see Onee-sama, she's always so composed. I don't think she'd ever be caught dead—

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Wait a second. Is Onee-sama...

Before I knew it, she's started hanging around Hajime-sama.

Before I knew it, her gaze is always fixed on him when he's in the room.

Why is that she looks so happy when he teases her? Why is that she looks so lonely when other girls are fawning over him? No, surely I must be jumping to conclusions.

Surely her attention is really focused on Kaori-sama, who always happens to be next to Hajime-sama. She's not following Hajime-sama around, but rather Kaori-sama. And the reason she looks so lonely is because she's sad he took her best friend from her.

That has to be it.

Here, I'll prove it.

"Onee-sama. Could it be that you have a crush on Hajime-sama?"

I asked her that straight-up when I got the chance.

"What are you talking about? Of course I don't." She looked at me blankly when she replied. She wasn't flustered, and she didn't blush at all, she just said that without any hesitation.

I knew you were better than that, Onee-sama! You won't fall for a guy that easily! Even though I should be relieved, how come I feel like drowning my sorrows in alcohol? In the end, I ended up drinking myself to sleep that night.

Terrible news. Onee-sama's going to be traveling with Hajime-sama.

Apparently, so will the princess. But even though I'm part of her guard, I'm being left behind.

Why? Why cruel world? What have I ever done? This reeks of a conspiracy.

"You've neglected your duty far too often, so I'm removing you from the royal guards. Train yourself from the ground up, you stupid moron." Kuzeli, the new knight commander of the kingdom, was telling me something, but I didn't pay any attention to her.

I can't believe Onee-sama's going to be leaving together with that man.

This is the worst day of my life! All I can do now is pray.

Onee-sama. Please don't let that man protect you any more than he already has.

Remember that the Soul Sisters will always believe in you!



Afterword

Hey everyone, chuuni lover Ryo Shirakome here.

Thank you so much for picking up Arifureta Volume 6.

Were any of you confused by the girl on the cover? Until now it's always been one of the heroines on there, but this time a girl who hasn't shown up in any of the illustrations was suddenly given the cover page.

Be honest, how many of you were like "Who's that girl!?" And how many of you went "Wait, that's Eri!?" when you saw the name on the inside flap? Me and everyone at the editing department planned this little surprise, so if it worked, then we're really happy.

Anyway, Kaori sure did a lot this volume. And now she's in Noint, a real apostle's body.

Now that I think about it, that's overkill. She already had cheat level healing magic that got powered up from the last labyrinth, and now she's got physical stats as good as Hajime's. Oh, and she can use Noint's disintegration magic, and has all the skills needed to wield her greatswords proficiently. I'm starting to think she's scarier than Hajime.

At any rate, congratulations on joining the ranks of monsters, Kaori! Speaking of monsters, Shea was really happy when Mikhail called her that too.

Were you all charmed by her smile when you saw the illustration? Can you believe she killed Mikhail while smiling that sweetly? I guess she really is a monster too! Thanks for giving us such a great image, Takayaki-sensei! It sure is wonderful to see Shea go from worthless rabbit to OP bunny girl.

There sure was a lot packed into this volume too. The invasion of the capital, Eri's betrayal, all those deaths, the destruction of the Holy Church, the unveiling of the Soul Sisters, Hajime's duel with Noint, all of his classmates' changing feelings... I think I've said this a bunch of times already, but this volume really does mark the big turning point for Arifureta.

It feels like time's passed by in the blink of an eye, but it also feels like it's taken forever to get here.

At any rate, I think with all the revisions, additions, and extra stories, the light novel's become a lot more complete than the web novel. I promise I'll keep downing gallons of coffee and work hard to

bring Arifureta to you all, so I hope you stick with me to the end.

Before we go, I'd like to give my thanks to everyone who made this volume possible.

First and foremost, a big thank you to Takayaki-sensei for all of his wonderful illustrations. Next, a huge thanks to my editor, who really helped me flesh out Kaori more as a character. I also want to thank my proofreader for picking out typos with the accuracy of a sniper. Plus, there's RoGa-sensei for all his wonderful work on the Arifureta manga, and all of the people at the publishing division that made this book a reality.

Lastly, I'd like to thank my readers. Both the ones who've supported the web version, and the ones picking this book up in stores.

Thank you so, so much for your support.

I pray we meet again in the next volume.

Ryo Shirakome

Bonus Short Stories

How to use Spatial Magic

“Okay everyone, it’s time for my special magic lessons.” Yue raised her pointer with one hand while adjusting her glasses using the other. Shea, Tio, Kaori, and Hajime all sat cross-legged in front of her. They were currently in one of the rooms in Ankaji’s palace. As thanks for purifying the oasis, Duke Zengen had given Hajime and the others free reign of the palace. They could stay whenever they wished.

“Yue, while I’m glad you are willing to teach us, you do realize neither me nor Kaori can use spatial magic, correct?”

“I’m sure there’s still some benefit to learning... By the way, Yue, what’s that large crystal for?”

Yue had basically dragged Tio and Kaori to the lesson, and they were still a little confused as to what they were even supposed to be doing, as well as what the strange round crystal Yue had brought was for.

“Mmm, a good question. This crystal is an artifact Hajime developed. It can record what it sees.”

Everyone turned to Hajime, who proudly explained how he’d used restoration magic to create a video recording device. He’d gotten the idea from seeing how Melusine had used it to reproduce events from the past as illusions, and enchanted the crystal with a similar spell.

“I used this wonderful artifact to record tips on how to use various spatial magic spells. It’s a very useful item. I love you, Hajime.”

“Please stop throwing in ‘I love you, Hajime’ in the middle of conversations like that, Yue-san. That doesn’t even follow logically.”

“I love you too, Yue. Glad to have been of service.”

“Alright alright, we know you two flirt every chance you get. Can we just get on with the lesson?”

Hajime and Yue entwined their hands and looked passionately into each other’s eyes. Pouting, Shea voiced her displeasure as her bunny ears flopped back and forth. Unable to watch any longer, Kaori charged in and physically separated the two of them. Ever since the events at the Sunken Ruins of Melusine, Kaori had grown even bolder than before.

“Mmm. Okay, time to show everyone how to use spatial magic. This video will explain the different uses of spatial magic and the most efficient ways to use it. Since we all fight together, I think it’s

important everyone understands how it works.”

“I understand now. This will indeed make for a good reference, then.”

Tio nodded in understanding, and the crystal began to glow.

“Wait, is that one of the palace hallways?”

Shea’s bunny ears perked up as she asked that. Hajime and the others nodded. The video did indeed show Yue standing in one of the palace’s hallways. From the looks of it, Yue was peeking at something from behind the corner. When she spotted Kaori walking down the corridor, Yue started gathering mana around her, making her hair float up a little.

“Wait, that was you!?” Kaori shouted. A second later, the Kaori in the video smacked her forehead into an invisible wall and staggered backward in pain.

“Here is a standard example of a barrier created by spatial magic. The main advantage to a spatial barrier is that you can make it invisible, as seen here.”

“Don’t sound so proud about it! So it really was you who did that!? How could you!?”

In the video, Kaori got back up and started feeling out the invisible wall, her confusion evident. It looked almost like she was pantomiming. Past the corner, Yue was snickering to herself. The real Kaori was boiling with anger and looked ready to throw herself at Yue.

“Hmph, that’s your punishment for feeding Hajime the fruit I’d specially prepared for him and pretending like it was from you.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Besides, even if that *was* true, it’s a certain vampire’s fault for feeding me misinformation about what fruit Hajime really does like. I’m sure it was justified.”

“Curse you. Fine, if that’s how you want to play, I won’t hold back.”

Kaori whistled innocently, or well, attempted to whistle, while Yue glared daggers at her. Shea and Tio exchanged a worried glance while Hajime muttered something.

“So those fruits were actually from Yue...”

The video continued playing, this time switching to a scene of Yue walking down the corridor. She appeared to be trying to move stealthily, and she stopped in front of a certain door. Golden mana swirled around her, and her hair fluttered in the artificial breeze.

“Wait, isn’t this...” Kaori recognized that door, but before she could finish her sentence the Yue in the video finished her spell. A forty-centimeter wide portal of light appeared in front of her and she stuck her head through it without hesitation. A second later—

“Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!?”

Kaori, who was sitting next to Hajime, screamed like a banshee.

Back in the video, Yue was peeking in on Kaori, who was crouching down after having just removed her underwear. Kaori moved faster than light, and delivered a powerful roundhouse kick to the crystal, which shattered. Even Hajime was captivated by her graceful and accurate movements. Unfortunately, the crystal had been demolished beyond repair.

“Shaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

“Hm!? You wanna fight!?”

Kaori leaped at Yue, moving so fast she left afterimages in her wake. She was using body strengthening on a scale even greater than what Shea, the overpowered bunny girl, was capable of.

“Wait, was that the bathroom Kaori was...”

“Hajime-san, there are some things you shouldn’t say. You’ll just hurt Kaori-san’s dignity. Also, Yue-san, you do some really mean things sometimes...”

“I know Yue and Kaori have been growing ever more belligerent toward each other, but even I think this is going too far...”

Shea flattened her bunny ears in terror while Tio slowly backed away from Yue. Hajime smiled bitterly as he watched Yue and Kaori’s catfight.

“I imagine Yue just wanted to get back at her. A few days ago, Kaori tried on Yue’s underwear in front of me and said ‘I knew it, the chest area’s too tight! Are you sure you didn’t accidentally get a kid’s bra!?’ with a smile.”

Shea and Tio gasped. *Just how badly do those two hate each other?* they thought to themselves. Yue was skilled enough with magic that she should have been able to blow Kaori off with ease, but she’d purposely chosen to engage her in a fistfight. It was strange to see either of them so heated up. Yue was normally so cool and composed, while Kaori was overflowing with compassion for everyone she interacted with. Yet right now they were snarling and growling at each other.

“You know, I think the two of them actually get along really well,” Hajime said with a smile. Shea and Tio exchanged glances. It certainly was rare to see either Yue or Kaori express these kinds of emotions.

“You might have a point.”

“Indeed.”

The two of them smiled as well.

“Yueee! Today’s the day I end you for good, you damn perverted vampire!”

“Kaoriii. It’s time you learned your place, you sneaky lecher!”

They certainly did seem like good friends. Probably. Hajime

hoped, anyway.

Arifureta Academy 5: Sports Tournament

A few days before the academy sports tournament, a certain rumor started to spread. Supposedly, if someone managed to win every event, the chairwoman would grant any one wish of theirs.

It appeared a certain magic teacher wanted to be transferred into the health department and made into one student's exclusive nurse.

A certain student wanted to get a certain teacher fired.

A certain other student wanted a special class made for just her and her crush.

A certain chairwoman wished for a certain boy to become her master.

A certain student council president wanted leave to quit.

It seemed quite a few people wanted to have their wishes granted. Most of the students had misgivings about the upcoming sports tournament, but the march of time was relentless. Soon enough, the dreaded day had arrived.

"Sensei! We've got three more here! All fractured ribs!"

"Give me a second! I'll get to them as soon as I can!"

"Sensei, Kudeta-sensei, the referee, has been knocked unconscious. His wounds look serious! He took an iron ball to the testicles, and he's foaming at the mouth! He needs urgent care!"

"Take him to the hospital, then! There are carriages waiting outside!"

The poor nurse, whose position a certain vampire was after, tried to sort through the chaos. The infirmary had reached full capacity, and a number of students had been forced to receive treatment in the hallway. Though all of the members of the health committee were casting healing magic as fast as humanly possible, they weren't able to keep up with the number of incoming patients. The infirmary looked more like a field hospital than a proper facility. The poor school nurse, a young woman who'd just recently married and was being threatened by a fellow teacher to hurry up and go on maternity leave, finally got fed up at the constant stream of injured people flowing in.

"Sheesh, what the heck is going on out there?"

She yelled, her hair splaying wildly about her. The poor nurse, who was unfairly hated by a fellow coworker, was unaware of the madness going on outside. It was turning out to be a very lively sports tournament, just not quite in the way people had hoped.

Over at the dodgeball field—

"Take thiiiiiiiiiiiis!" Ryutarou threw a ball as hard as he could toward the opposing court.

“Ngh!” Shizuku, the student council president, used a volleyball receive to lessen the force of Ryutarou’s fastball and just barely managed to catch it.

“Tch, I knew you’d be the biggest problem, Shizuku...”

“You almost had her, Ryutarou-kun,” Kaori said cheerfully.

Ryutarou and Kaori were the only two people left on their side of the court. Meanwhile, Shizuku’s team still had four people, including her. The fact that Shizuku could receive even his best throw put Ryutarou in a tight spot. Kaori was sadly useless at both catching and throwing. Though he didn’t want to admit it, it appeared the student council team would win the dodgeball match.

“Sorry, but I really want to live a stress-free school life. I don’t know if those rumors are true or not, but I’ll crush anyone who gets in the way of me quitting the student council!”

The other students gave her sympathetic looks. Working on the council really was that grueling. Shizuku passed the ball to an outfielder. Ryutarou wasn’t sure if she was trying to catch him off-guard with an unexpected tactic, or just trying to finish Kaori off first.

“Goddammit! You keep buzzing about like an annoying fly!”

Shizuku’s teammates kept passing to each other at dizzying speeds, confusing Ryutarou’s senses. His movements grew rough, and the moment he let his guard down—

“Shit!”

“You’re mine!”

Shizuku’s teammate threw the ball straight at Kaori. Because of the constant passes, Ryutarou had been lured away from her and wouldn’t be able to get back to her in time. The ball hadn’t been thrown with as much force as Ryutarou’s fastball, but it wasn’t something Kaori could handle.

“Stoooooooooooooooooop!” Ryutarou’s scream echoed throughout the court. A second later—

“Ryutarou-kun Barrier!”

“Uwooooh!?”

Time ground to a halt. Ryutarou, who should have been too far away, suddenly flew in front of Kaori and took the ball with his face. Kaori had bound him with her chains and used him as a shield. Devoid of force, the ball slowly slipped to the ground. Kaori easily caught it before it did, and then threw it lightly up into the air.

“Take this, Ryutarou-kun Hammer!”

“Gwah!?”

Kaori swung Ryutarou into the ball, using him as a literal hammer. His eyes rolled back into his head as his forehead connected solidly with the ball. Kaori’s superball hit Atsushi Tamai, one of Shizuku’s teammates, right in the stomach.

“Gaaah!?” He screamed, and flew a good ten meters backward. He came to a stop outside the court and lay still.

“I’m just getting started!”

“You monster!”

Kaori Shirasaki was the kind of girl who did whatever it took to get what she wanted. *I’ll get that vixen fired no matter what it takes! If I have to sacrifice a few my friends along the way, so be it!*

In truth, the person Ryutarou had been screaming stop to wasn’t the people on Shizuku’s team, but Kaori. It was a wonder he’d made it to the finals in one piece.

Meanwhile, over at the soccer field—

“Shit, someone, anyone, stop her!” Kouki screamed desperately as Shea dribbled her way past his team, her bunny ears fluttering in the wind. Saitou, one of Kouki’s teammates, did his absolute best to try and snatch the ball away from her. However, Shea’s keen sense of hearing alerted her to his movements, and to the fact that two other people were circling behind her. Even if she dodged the first, the second might still be able to take the ball from her, so she sent the ground flying at them.

“Outta my waaaaaaaaaaaaay!”

“Gyaaaaaaah!”

Shea stomped hard onto the ground in front of her, pulverizing it and sending clods of earth and pebbles flying at Saitou. He screamed in pain and staggered backward while the ball soared over his head. The earth wave hit Nakano and Kondou, who were coming in behind Saitou, as well. Both of them screamed, “My eyes! I can’t see!” as rocks pelted their faces.

“R-Referee, that was an illegal move!” Despite Kouki’s protests, the referee just looked away. As this was a magical school, using magic was allowed, to a limited extent. For example, the goalie could erect barriers to block the ball, and strikers could manipulate the wind to shift a ball’s trajectory, so strengthening yourself enough to kick up a chunk of earth was technically within the rules as well. That meant something like Shea accidentally kicking the Azantium-filled ball into the previous referee’s testicles despite his continued attempts to warn Shea not to be too rough were still technically not illegal moves.

Shea ran all the way up to the goal and shot the ball so hard she kicked up gravel in her wake. It sailed straight into the net and netted her team their tenth point. Suzu, the goalkeeper, was huddling in a corner of the goal with a barrier around herself to protect her. When Shea made her shot, she didn’t even try to block it. In fact, she just tried to make her already tiny body seem even smaller.

“Yahooooooooooooooooo!”

Shea raised both hands into the air and bellowed a victory cry.

Shea was the kind of girl who would trample down anyone in her path for the sake of her goals.

Meanwhile, at the tennis court—

“Bwah!?”

The chairwoman flew across the tennis court. She traced an arc through the air and crashed into the ground a few meters away, a tennis ball stuck firmly in her cheek. She slowly stumbled to her feet, legs twitching. Even for the sturdiest person in school, that had been quite a blow.

“Y-Yue-sensei, while I understand magic is allowed, I do not think using gravity magic on the ball is fair...”

“The ball was in.”

Yue was facing Tio in the final match of the tennis tournament. For the past few minutes, the ball had been bouncing in ways that made it clear it was ignoring gravity, and also inexplicably hitting Tio in her vitals every time. Though Yue looked absolutely stunning in her tennis uniform, no one had the guts to look at her. Nor did anyone have the guts to complain about a teacher and the chairman playing in a tournament that was meant for the students. None of them wanted to be hospitalized after all. Anyone who’d raised a complaint, whether they’d been on the court or just one of the spectators, had been sent to the infirmary by Yue’s gravity shot.

“Very well, if you refuse to adhere to the spirit of the rules, then I see no reason to either! Breath Shot!”

“Ultimate Technique— Gate Return.”

“Wait, that really is against the ru— Bwaaah!?”

The blazing tennis ball vanished through the portal in front of Yue’s hand and slammed straight into Tio’s back. Tio skidded across the court and came to a stop right before the net. This time, she didn’t get back up.

“The ball’s still in.” Yue glared coldly at the referee. As far as she was concerned, it was fair play so long as the ball remained in. The referee was too terrified to argue back, and so judged in her favor. Yue was the kind of girl who would stoop to anything if it meant she would get to be the school nurse.

Meanwhile, at the table tennis room—

The click-clack of a ping pong ball hitting the table echoed over and over.

“You’re pretty good, Endou.”

“You think so? Hehe, truth is I actually practice quite a bit.”

“I see.”

Click-clack, click-clack.

“Table tennis sure is fun.”

“Yeah.”

Hajime and Endou conversed normally.

Click-clack, click-clack.

They continued playing a peaceful, normal game of table tennis.

In the end, the sports tournament had to be canceled because there were too many injuries.

The Red Flower of Fate

“Oh? You still have this, Yue-san?”

Hajime and the others were in the middle of packing their belongings, as they’d be leaving Ankaji soon. Yue stopped in the middle of her packing and turned to Shea, who was holding a pair of bunny ears in her hands. Tio and Kaori looked over as well, and almost dropped their luggage in shock.

“What!? Sh-Shea, were your rabbit ears detachable?”

“D-Do they regrow if you take them off?”

“Of course not, guys. Quit turning my ears into something weird. These are fake rabbit ears Yue-san made a while back.”

Shea flopped her bunny ears back and forth to emphasize the difference between the real and the fake ones as she handed the bunny ear headband to Kaori. Kaori turned it over in her hands and nodded in understanding.

“Mmm, I made those when I got jealous of Hajime staring at Shea’s rabbit ears all the time... Well, not like I need them anymore. I’ve already discovered that cat ears are superior.”

“I-I refuse to accept that, Yue-san! Hajime-san only liked them more that one time because you were wearing them. I’m sure if it came down to just a pair of rabbit ears or a pair of cat ears, rabbit ears would be superior!”

Yue took out her cat ears and put them on, as if to say, “You wanna go!?” Yue-nyan was ready to battle.

Shea made her rabbit ears shoot straight up, as if to say, “You wanna go!?” Regular Shea was ready to battle.

Tio absently watched the two of them fight over animal ear superiority and mused to herself.

“I see... So you were a connoisseur of animal ears, Master... Dragonmen have tails, but no special pairs of ears. Hmm, I suppose if I wish to appeal to you, I must throw away pride and don the ears of a cat... or rather, a dog. For that way you could insult me like the bitch I am... No wait, perhaps I should create a pair of pig ears if I truly wish to be belittled!” She turned toward Kaori, seeking a second opinion. Kaori didn’t hear, as she was too busy examining Yue’s fake rabbit ears. Though she seemed fascinated by them, she made no move to put them on. Instead, a wicked grin formed on her face as she

continued staring at the ears. That expression scared Tio a little.

Worried that Kaori might do something that would ruin the gentle and kind impression Tio had of her, she called out to Kaori.

“Kaori, you must return to reality. Your expression is beginning to terrify me.”

“Huh!?” Kaori blushed as she realized how she must have looked. Shea and Yue stopped grappling with each other and glared suspiciously at her.

“Confess, you closeted pervert. What were you doing to my Hajime in your fantasies?”

“I’m not a closet pervert! A-And I wasn’t fantasizing or anything!”

“Oh? What do you think, Shea-san, Tio-san?”

“She’s guilty!”

“All I shall say is that trying to deny it will only make things worse for you in the end.”

“Ugh...” Kaori’s shoulders slumped. Yue continued glaring at her, silently urging her to confess, while Kaori tried to look anywhere but at Yue.

“I was thinking that the rabbit ears might look good on Hajime-kun...”

The other girls all sat up straight, as if a jolt of electricity had just run through them.

“A rabbit-eared Hajime?”

“He’d be matching with me...”

“Oh ho...” Yue closed her eyes and imagined what a rabbit-eared Hajime would look like.

“Welcome home, Lady Yue. Here, give me your hand.” A butler Hajime with rabbit ears helped Yue out of her carriage.

Shea closed her eyes and imagined what a rabbit-eared Hajime would look like.

“We’ll be together forever, dear.” A rabbit-eared Hajime looked lovingly at his new wife, Shea, surrounded by the splendor of a grand wedding feast.

Tio closed her eyes and imagined what a rabbit-eared Hajime would look like.

“You perverted waste of space! Hurry up and give me my boxers back!” A rabbit-eared Hajime was acting the same as usual and stepping on Tio.

Kaori closed her eyes and imagined what a rabbit-eared Hajime would look like.

“I’m sorry I’m always causing you so much trouble, Kaori... I don’t know what I’d do without you.” A rabbit-eared spy, Hajime, looked lovingly up at Kaori, who was nursing him back to health. He’d been betrayed by his partner, Yue, and Kaori had found him slumped in the

streets on a rainy day and brought him back to her house.

For some reason, Kaori's delusion was far more detailed than the others. Meanwhile, Tio's didn't even require Hajime to have rabbit ears at all. At any rate, a few minutes after everyone had sunk into the world of daydreams, bright-red showers of happiness began spurting from their noses.

"Hey, you four, have you finished packing your things...? Whoa, what the heck!? What happened!? Why do you all have nosebleeds!?"

Hajime hurried over to them, a mixture of confusion and worry on his face. However, despite the bloody spectacle, all four girls were smiling happily.

Lecher, Brute, and Demon

There was currently a strange guest staying in Duke Zengen's palace in the oasis city of Ankaji.

"Munch, munch."

"How is it, Myu? Does it taste good?"

Myu was blissfully stuffing herself with all of Ankaji's best fruits. Airi, the duke's daughter, watched Myu eat with a smile on her face. She was only fourteen, and still captivated by the antics of young children. Beastmen were generally shunned by humans and considered to be inferior creatures, but dragons had received special exemption from the Holy Church.

Still, it would normally have been unthinkable for one to be hosted in the royal palace. Especially as the duke's own daughter was the one entertaining her. Under any other circumstances, Airi's attendants would have stopped her from greeting Myu and reprimanded Myu for her insolence. Yet Airi's attendants were also smiling as they watched Myu stuff her cheeks like a squirrel. They made no move to stop Airi from fussing over the dragon girl. Myu finished her current mouthful of fruit and turned to Airi.

"It's really tasty! Thank you, Airi-oneechan!"

"Heh, don't worry about it. You're the precious daughter of the man who saved our city."

Indeed, the reason Myu was receiving such favorable treatment was because her (surrogate) father had done their city a great service. Not only had he rid Ankaji of the monster that had been poisoning their oasis, he had risked life and limb to bring the citizens the stillstone they needed to fend off the poison they'd been drinking. He'd stayed behind in an erupting volcano and had still found a way to entrust Tio the medicine and ensure it reached the people safely. As far as Ankaji's residents were concerned, he was a hero. There was no way they could treat his beloved daughter with disrespect. Besides,

she was just too cute to hate.

“Ehehe. You’re so nice, Airi-oneechan.”

Airi patted Myu’s head, her smile growing wider.

“Hnnngh!”

“Airi-sama, while I understand how you feel, it is unbecoming for one of your stature to look so... childish. Please, at least wipe that drool from your face.”

“Hah!? Oh no... Myu’s so cute it’s scary.” Airi sucked her drool back in and wiped her face with a handkerchief. She went from looking like a pervert to a graceful lady in the span of a few seconds. Myu’s scariness wasn’t just in how cute she looked. She also acted cute, had a cute personality, and just basically exuded cuteness from every pore. Airi was the youngest child in her family, and she’d always wanted a little sibling, so whenever Myu called her “Airi-oneechan,” she basically lost it. Even Airi’s maids and the palace staff who interacted with Myu were enthralled by how adorable she was.

“Mmm... Daddy...” Myu’s face clouded over as she thought back to her adopted father, who was currently missing and presumed to be in grave danger. Airi mentally berated herself, convinced it was somehow her fault she’d made Myu think of Hajime. She hurriedly tried to cheer the little girl up.

“M-Myu? Umm... I’m sure Hajime-sama’s... well...”

The Grand Gruen Volcano hadn’t erupted in centuries, and the eruption this time had been so powerful that even the residents of Ankaji had been able to see it. Hajime had been in the volcano’s mouth when that had happened. Thinking about it logically, he should have been vaporized instantly. In fact, most people did believe their hero had perished valiantly. However, all of Hajime’s comrades believed without a doubt that he was still alive, and Duke Zengen had declared that he would not officially recognize his death. And so, though the people believed him dead, they held their tongues. Airi didn’t know what to say that would comfort Myu. Seeing her at a loss for words, Myu decided to comfort Airi instead.

“It’s okay. Everyone says Daddy’s the strongest in the world, so I’ll see him again. Daddy promised he’d come back... so don’t be sad, Airi-oneechan.”

“My... Myu!”

Myu patted Airi’s head with her tiny hand. Airi was moved to tears by the gesture. Even though Myu was probably the one most hurt over Hajime’s disappearance, she still was still trying to comfort others. What an unbelievably strong little girl. Airi hugged Myu tight, while her maids muttered things like “What a brave girl...” or “She’s an angel,” or “Myu-tan... Haaah... Haaah...”

“Myu, would you like to tell us about what kind of person your

father, Hajime-sama, is?"

"You want to know about Daddy?"

"Yes. He saved you from an underground auction at Fuhren, right? I had heard you'd been kidnapped and were going to be sold off. I'd love to hear the heroic tale of how he saved you."

Surely this girl, who has absolute faith in her father, would love to talk more about him. Airi's guess was right on the mark. Myu's eyes lit up at the prospect of talking about Hajime. Airi and her maids smiled, glad to see Myu happy again.

Just what kind of wonderful tale will Myu tell us?

"So when Daddy saved me, he made all of Fuhren burn!"

"What!?"

"He made all the buildings go boooooom!"

"What!?"

"And then he made lightning fall from the sky!"

"What!?"

"Everyone said Daddy dyed Fuhren red!"

"....." None of them had been expecting a tale of death and destruction.

"Umm, ahem! Myu, I think you may have summarized your story a little too much. Could you please go into more detail for us?"

"Okay. It's story time!" Myu cleared her throat and sat up straighter. Her seriousness made Airi and the others straighten their backs as well. They felt as though they'd be overwhelmed if they didn't go in prepared.

"When I tried to run away, I had to go through this dirty place called a sooter."

"Oh my... you really are amazing, Myu."

Airi and the others gulped as they tried to imagine it. Just how bad must things have been if swimming through the sewers had been Myu's only choice?

"Then, when I woke up, Daddy had taken my clothes off."

"He did what!?"

"It was really warm and felt good."

"I-It felt good!?"

"Shea-oneechan was really nice to me."

"A-A threesome!?"

Though Myu wasn't lying, she'd left out the crucial detail that Hajime had done all this to give her a bath. It was understandable that she'd skip ahead, given how young she was. Sadly, Myu's abridged explanation had left Airi and the others imagining something very different than what had happened.

"Then Daddy left me."

"He abandoned you!?"

Once again, Myu had forgotten to mention that he'd left her in the care of an organization which helped kidnapped children get back home.

"But then Daddy came back for me!" Airi and the others breathed a sigh of relief.

"He said, 'how come you're always soaked whenever I see you?' and gave me a blanket because I had no clothes."

Isn't it your fault she's always wet!? Airi and the others thought to themselves. Though Myu was giggling as she told her tale, Airi and the others couldn't help but think that she'd been picked up by an absolute brute of a man. And the tales of his terrible exploits still weren't over.

"Then, Daddy hugged me real tight... and blew up the heads of ten bad guys."

"Don't tell me he killed her real guardians..."

"I could believe it. Dagoes are protected by law, I'm sure a man who goes around making them wet is someone they didn't want her to be with."

The misunderstandings continued to grow.

"Oh, he didn't blow up one of them. He crushed them instead."

"That's enough." One of the maids was already covering her ears. She couldn't bear to hear anymore. Confused, Myu cut to the end of the story.

"Then, Daddy took Myu into the sky and made an... eggssample? Of everyone."

"So that's what you meant by 'he dyed Führen red.'" Airi was trembling in terror. This was too much for a fourteen year old girl to take. It appeared their beloved hero had another side to him. One that took advantage of little girls, mercilessly killed her guardians, and slaughtered an entire city just to set an example. However, Airi was a nobleman's daughter. She quickly recovered her wits and looked resolutely at her maids. They overcame their fear and returned her determined gaze. The lot of them swore that if he still lived, they would never let that man get near Myu.

The next day, Myu set off to look for her daddy. Airi and the others saw her off with tears in their eyes.

Ten days after that, Hajime, who had miraculously survived, returned to Ankaji. It seemed he'd done quite a bit more for the city, but that didn't matter. Airi was going to give him a piece of her mind.

"You lecher! Brute! Demon!"

"Wh-What the heck did I do!?"

Hajime's face cramped up as he endured a barrage of insults from Airi and her maids.

Tragedy in the Carriage

A gloomy atmosphere filled the carriage. The people sitting inside all exchanged glances, but then averted their gazes. They all wanted someone to do something about the problem at hand, but no one wanted to be the one to volunteer.

“Haaah...”

“.....” A sigh heavier than a neutron star escaped Kouki’s lips. The other inhabitants of the carriage, Ryutarou, Shizuku, Eri, and Suzu, all twitched. Ryutarou shot an unexpectedly timid gaze at his best friend, who was the cause of the gloomy atmosphere.

He’s totally dead...

He’s not dead! Though he might as well be, with how he looks. Suzu somehow read Ryutarou’s thoughts, and retorted with a telepathic message of her own.

Indeed, Kouki was still alive, though he resembled a corpse at the moment. His head drooped on the windowsill. Though he was looking out at the vibrant countryside, his eyes took in none of the scenery.

There was none of his usual vitality in his dead expression. He might as well have been a zombie. There were a multitude of reasons for his languid demeanor, but the primary one was discovering that Kaori was in love, and had left his party to travel with her crush. Kouki wasn’t sure if he loved Kaori or not. However, he had expected that she would be by his side forever, no matter what happened. That was why Kaori’s confession and subsequent elopement had shocked him so.

Worse, he’d let his emotions get the better of him and challenged Hajime to a duel. Not only had Hajime not bothered to even humor him, Kouki had ended up falling into a pitfall without even so much as scratching his opponent.

“I just want to crawl into a hole and die...”

“You already did the crawling into a hole part. Do you have any idea how hard it was to dig you out?” What Ryutarou had meant as a lighthearted joke was the final blow that crushed Kouki’s soul.

“Waaaaaah, Ryutarou-kun, you moron! Kouki-kun! Are you alright! Pull it together! Everything’ll be okay! Right, Eririn!”

“Wait, you’re asking me!? U-Umm, yes, of course, everything will be just fine, Kouki-kun!” Their attempts at reassuring Kouki only made things worse

How is anything going to be okay!? Kouki thought painfully to himself. He didn’t register Suzu smacking Ryutarou over the head, or Eri trying her best to comfort him, or Shizuku looking tiredly up at the ceiling. That was how bad his depression was.

Suddenly, with the determination of someone resolved to go to battle and never come back, Suzu stood up.

“I’ll give him a one-liner that’ll definitely make him laugh!”

The others looked over at Suzu in awe. *What a hero!* Suzu shrugged off their stares, and resolved to prove that she could cheer people up even in this gloomy atmosphere.

“Hmm, where did they go? I can’t find them! I could have sworn I took them with me on this trip, but they’re not here!” Suzu started patting her clothes and looking around the carriage. As always, Kouki was unable to ignore someone in need. He looked over at Suzu, momentarily returning to the real world.

“Suzu, what did you—”

“I just can’t seem to find my boobs!” Suzu said in an exaggerated manner, patting her own sadly flat chest. For a one-shot gag, it was pretty painful. Silence filled the carriage. Time itself stopped. The only thing anyone could hear was the soft clapping of the horse’s hooves.

“I’m sorry for being born.” Suzu slumped back into her seat. She leaned her head back against the carriage wall and stared at the ceiling with dead eyes. She’d completely self-destructed.

“H-Hey Suzu, are you alright?”

“Next up, please enjoy Ryutarou-kun’s attempt to do impersonations.”

“What!?” Ryutarou’s reward for his concern was being volunteered to be next up on the chopping block. If Suzu was going to die, she’d make sure to take everyone down with her. Eri backed away from her friend in horror. Ryutarou sat in his seat, cold sweat pouring down his back. But when Kouki once again looked out the window with dead eyes, he made up his mind and stood up.

“O-Okay, fine, I’ll do my best impression of Colonel William Stuart!” Ryutarou sucked in a deep breath and flexed, showing off the full glory of his considerable muscles. For those who didn’t know, Stuart was from a certain film known as *Die Hard*. Ryutarou got even more into his act and flexed even harder. However, it was not as well received as he would have liked.

“This is too macho for me.”

“S-Sorry, I can’t bear to look.”

“It hurts to breathe.”

Suzu, Eri, and Shizuku all glared at Ryutarou. It appeared his impersonation had brought the girls nothing but pain.

“I’m sorry for being born.” Ryutarou collapsed into his seat. He looked out the window with the same dead eyes as Kouki.

“Eririn... You’ll have to carry on our will.”

“Suzu!? I thought we were friends!” Eri shot Suzu, who was still gazing blankly at the ceiling, a murderous glare. She was asking for the impossible! However, it appeared Suzu and Ryutarou’s sacrifices hadn’t been in vain. Kouki finally turned around and focused on Eri. It

seemed with one more push, they might really be able to bring the hero back to normal.

“Very well... I shall sing!” Eri raised her hands to her mouth, as if she were holding an imaginary mike, and began singing in a beautiful voice. Her pitch was perfect, and she had a great sense of rhythm. It was the kind of voice that enthralled people. Or it would have been, had she not picked one of the most depressing love songs known to man.

“Th-Thank you for being such a silent and attentive audience.”

They’d been silent alright. In fact, they were deathly pale. Despair, loneliness, and other negative emotions had sapped their mental fortitude. Kouki looked as if he’d aged ten years. Eri’s proud smile faded as she saw the effect her singing had wrought on her audience. She quietly plopped back into her seat and hid her expression behind her glasses. Things weren’t looking good.

“Shizushizu, you’re the only one left now,” Suzu mumbled in despair. Shizuku, who’d been desperately trying to hide her presence, jumped. Timidly, she raised her head to see everyone but Kouki staring at her. “You don’t think really you’re the only one who gets to get out of this, do you?” their gazes seemed to say. Tears pooling in her eyes, Shizuku got to her feet. She covered both of her eyes with her ponytail, and said in a high falsetto,

“Eh, Nagumo-kun did? I don’t believe it! He always seemed like a quiet, low profile kind of guy.”

“.....”

It appeared Shizuku was acting out a fake interview with the other students.

“Nagumooo...” Kouki groaned. He had wanted to forget all about Hajime, but now he couldn’t.

Why the hell did you have to bring HIM up!? Suzu and the others glared at Shizuku. Trembling, Shizuku slumped to her knees and wrapped her arms around herself. Her ponytail was still covering her eyes. Now she was the one who wished she could crawl into a hole and die. In the end, nothing but corpses remained inside the carriage. The only thing that could be heard was the steady clopping of the horse.

A few hours later, the group stopped for a rest. Nagayama and the others got out of their respective carriages to stretch their limbs a little. When they noticed no one was coming out of Kouki’s carriage they grew curious.

“What happened to them?” Meld wondered aloud, and approached their carriage. Though he knocked on the door and called everyone’s names, no one came out. A little worried, Meld pulled open the door and peeked inside.

“Wh-What happened to you guys!? Why do you all look so dead!? Guards, guards! Kouki and the others need medical attention! Who’s the best healer here!?” Meld panicked and ran to find a healer.

Arifureta Folk Tales ~The Honest Woodcutter~

One day, a woodcutter was cutting down trees near a certain spring. He had with him his trusty magic-powered azantium chainsaw. His chainsaw made a loud buzzing noise as it cut through trees like a hot knife through butter. With his trusty chainsaw, the young man could chop down anything he pleased, whether it be boulders or steel walls. A tool like this would be just as useful on a battlefield as it was in a forest. Anyone who wielded it would be able to mow down hordes of soldiers with ease. Swords, shields, and even plate armor would be unable to withstand its might.

As for why a mere woodcutter possessed such a powerful tool, well, it’s not important. Why he was still just a woodcutter despite having the ability to be far more was also not important.

With a resounding crash, one of the trees fell to the ground.

“Phew, looks like work went well today, too.” Today’s job was done. It had only taken the young man five minutes, but he still wiped a bead of imaginary sweat off his brow. Just then, he sensed something trying to kill him!

“Tch, die you worthless mutt!” He let loose a string of violent curses that one wouldn’t expect to hear from a village woodcutter. The young man then pulled loose an L-shaped piece of metal from his pocket and took aim. A second later, a streak of red light was set loose through the trees. There sure were a lot of things being set loose today.

The last thing to come loose was the head of the “mutt” he’d shot at, a wolf-like monster that had been hiding in a nearby thicket. The moment the streak of light hit its head, it blew clean off.

Still, there wasn’t just one wolf aiming for the young man’s life. He fired off a series of flashes that brutally obliterated the entire pack. The scene was gruesome enough that it should have been censored. The peaceful forest was dyed red with the blood of monsters.

“Tch, as always, all you’ve got on your side is numbers. Hm? Shit, the goods!” Until now, the young devil who’d been painting the forest red had been perfectly composed. However, he lost his cool when he noticed one of the wolves sneaking up to his precious goods.

By goods, he of course meant the splendid tree he’d just chopped down. The monster then heartlessly activated its special magic and shot a fireball at the tree. Even if the woodcutter slaughtered the monster now, his tree would be burnt beyond recognition. The

woodcutter flung his L-shaped weapon to the side, raised his chainsaw in both hands, and charged toward the fireball.

“Like hell I’ll let you!” With a spirited cry, the woodcutter swung his chainsaw down and split the fireball in two. He then swung it back up, slicing right through the wolf’s stomach. Another red flower blossomed amidst the green trees.

“Phew, I made it... Oh yeah...” Once again wiping an imaginary bead of sweat off his brow, the woodcutter looked about for the weapon he’d thrown earlier. When his gaze passed over the spring, he noticed there were ripples in the previously still water.

“Crap! I can’t believe I threw it right into the spring!”

The woodcutter walked over to the edge of the spring. Seeing as he couldn’t find his weapon anywhere else, it was likely it had fallen in. He slumped his shoulders and sighed.

“Man, what do I do? Without that, it’ll take more time to annihilate monsters and thieves. God, what a pain.”

The spring was both wide and deep. Diving to the bottom to search for his weapon would take considerable time and effort.

“Maybe I should just throw a bunch of burning taur down there and vaporize the spring.”

The woodcutter muttered ominously. Taur burned at an impressive 3000 degrees Celsius, so it would certainly be possible. The spring suddenly began to sparkle, as if reacting to the woodcutter’s terrifying remarks. Surprised, the man turned on his chainsaw and got ready to fight. From within the spring’s depths, a person emerged.

“Wow...” The usually curt and cruel woodcutter gasped in wonder. That was just how beautiful the goddess who had emerged from the spring was. Nothing could match her splendor. Her golden-blond hair sparkled in the sunlight. Her long eyelashes and deep crimson eyes captivated all who gazed upon her. Her porcelain-white skin was tinged with the faintest of blushes. She appeared to be no more than twelve or thirteen years old, but her passionate gaze and seductive smile made her seem much older. She was quite the captivating goddess. Her slender limbs peeked out from a pure white gown. When she spotted the woodcutter, the goddess crouched down in front of him. She then thrust both hands into the spring and pulled something out with each. The woodcutter had expected her to use magic, not something as mundane as her own two hands.

“Is this your crafty rabbit? Or is this your perverted priestess?”

The woodcutter didn’t know how to respond. The goddess had just pulled two people out of the spring. One had bunny ears growing out of her head, while the other was dressed in priestess robes. They were both soaked through and seemed rather miffed at being held up by their collars. From the sound of it, the goddess had plunged them into

the spring against their will. It seemed this was a goddess who kidnapped people.

“Ugh. Hey you, mister with the chainsaw. Won’t you please pick this poor rabbit? If you do, I’ll devote these bunny ears to you for life!”

The woodcutter wasn’t quite sure what it meant to have bunny ears devoted to him, but he certainly was tempted. The bunny girl had an impressive bust size, and she made sure to emphasize it while pleading the young man.

I see now, she definitely is crafty.

“U-Umm, you over there! The guy who turned this peaceful forest into a battlefield, I mean. Do you think you could help me? If you pick me, I’ll do anything you ask!”

The woodcutter wasn’t sure what she was expecting him to ask of her, but he could tell by her blushing and fidgeting that it wasn’t anything wholesome. The priestess buried her face in her hands, but continued peeking coyly through her fingers at the woodcutter.

I see now, she’s definitely a pervert.

“I didn’t drop anything living into the spring, you know.”

“Huh!?”

The crafty bunny girl and perverted priestess looked at him in shock.

“Mmm... I suppose that’s understandable. We don’t need these, then.”

“Hey, don’t you think that’s a little rude!?”

“Y-You’re so mean, Ha—”

The goddess dumped both of them back into the spring. They didn’t come back up.

“Then, is this your—”

“Oh, is it my turn already? Very well, Master. Please insult—”

“Next.” The goddess dropped what she picked up before the woodcutter even had a good chance to look at it. From the quick glimpse he’d gotten, he assumed it was some strange creature. The goddess stuck her hand into the spring once more and fished around. After a while, it seemed she found what she was looking for and pulled her hand back out.

“Mmm... Is this your thirty-five centimeter long, taur-made, azantium-coated, Lightning Field-powered, six shot revolver capable of railgun-enhanced shots and named after the German word for thunder, aka Donner?”

What a frighteningly detailed description. It was hard to believe she’d seen it for the first time with how accurate it was. It was almost as if this goddess had been watching the woodcutter all this time.

The woodcutter’s expression stiffened. He was realizing, perhaps a

little too late, that this goddess was dangerous. Chills ran down his spine, and he opened his mouth to say that it was indeed his. However, the goddess interrupted him before he could.

“Or...” She took her empty hand and placed it elegantly on her own chest.

“Is this your goddess?”

“Like I said, I didn’t drop anything living into that spring.” The woodcutter retorted. The goddess narrowed her eyes. That was the look of a hunter eyeing her prey.

“This is your goddess, isn’t it?” Now she was pushing herself onto the woodcutter. However, he wasn’t one to be swayed that easily.

“No, I dropped Donner into there. The gun you’re hiding behind your back. Please give it back to me. Hey, wait, don’t throw it away! What? I have to pick you if I want it back? Now you’re just blackmailing me!”

The goddess attempted to throw Donner back into the spring, tears in her eyes, while the woodcutter did everything in his power to stop her. Sounds of their life and death struggle resounded throughout the woods. In the end, their tale ended just how it was meant to according to folklore. For his honesty, the woodcutter received everything the goddess had offered him before. That, of course, meant he received both his revolver and a smiling goddess.



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Arifureta: From Commonplace to World's Strongest Vol. 6
by Ryo Shirakome

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